RUNT—a J. Allan Dunn Western novel

Short Stories

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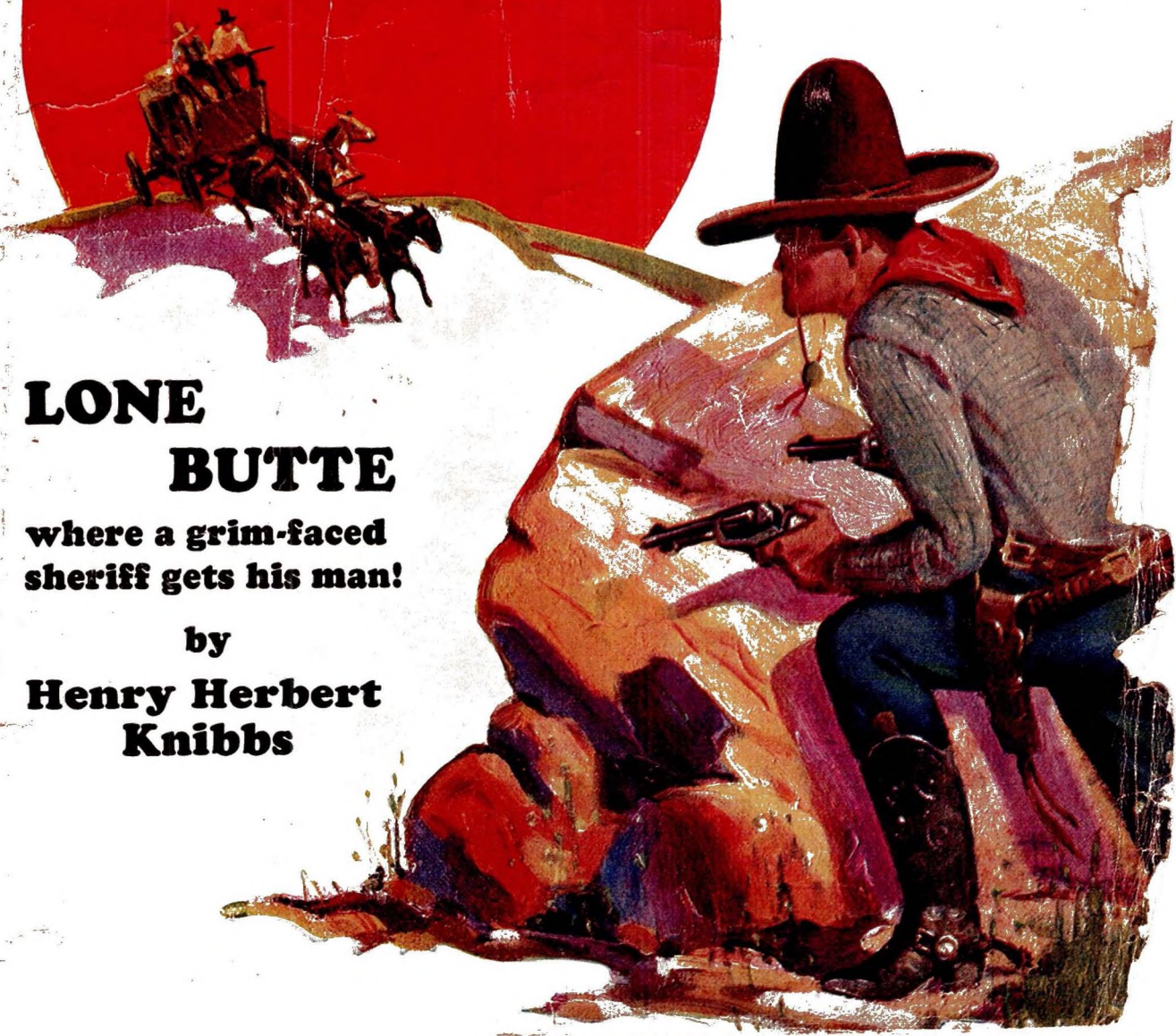

LONE BUTTE

where a grim-faced sheriff gets his man!

by

Henry Herbert Knibbs

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Short Stories

Vol. CXXI, No. 4 Whole No. 527

HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

WHAT YOU AIMIN' AT, STRANGER?

"WELL, mister, I'd admire for to know whether we are put in this here world of tribulation, to struggle and strive and never to be satisfied till we get far beyond the place we started from; or whether on t'other hand we ought to be happy and contented doin' the job we know best." Hank Hardrock propounded the question to the visiting Dude who somehow had gained the old range rider's confidence. "In other words," answered the visitor, "you wonder whether the aim of life should be achievement or just happiness?"

"Right now you take the boys on this here spread. They show just what I mean. There's Shorty. He never expects to be no more than a good cowhand, ridin' and ropin' and now and then pickin' up a little money on the side in the rodeos. Point is, he's as happy as a coyote in a hen coop and nobody to home, compared to a feller like Idaho there, allus studyin' on some scheme, allus strivin' to get away from ranchin' and to be somethin' else. First he wants to act for the movies, next he wants to ride the rodeo circuit. That feller's quit his job oftener than any feller here but the boss takes him back because he sorta admires his nerve and because he's a good cowhand, howbeit a cussed oneasy one.

"Not meanin' o' course a feller shouldn't try to better himself. Look at Charley Russell, Will Rogers, Will James, all cowboys who went higher and made fortunes. I mean, how about the ones who really ain't fitten for no other job but handlin' stock? I claim that sooner or later they ought to recognize it, do the best they can in that an' *be happy.*"

"That's just the same problem that affects men in my business, and all business, Hank. We all keep hoping that we shall make our fortune in the next try, and the trick is to find out early what we do best and stick to it."

THE EDITOR.

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THE PAINTED STALLION

A novel of a tenderfoot who thought he knew just how to become a salty range hand —but it was time and trouble that did it

by

GEORGE C. HENDERSON

The Man from Montana

He was a mystery, but mighty quick with his trigger finger

by

ERNEST HAYCOX

Under the Double TC

Bus routes have their perils as well as gang wars

by

KERRY RALSTON

The Buckfoot Sweepstakes

A story wherein an old-timer opines that a gold rush is merely a matter of good legs

by

CLIFFORD KNIGHT

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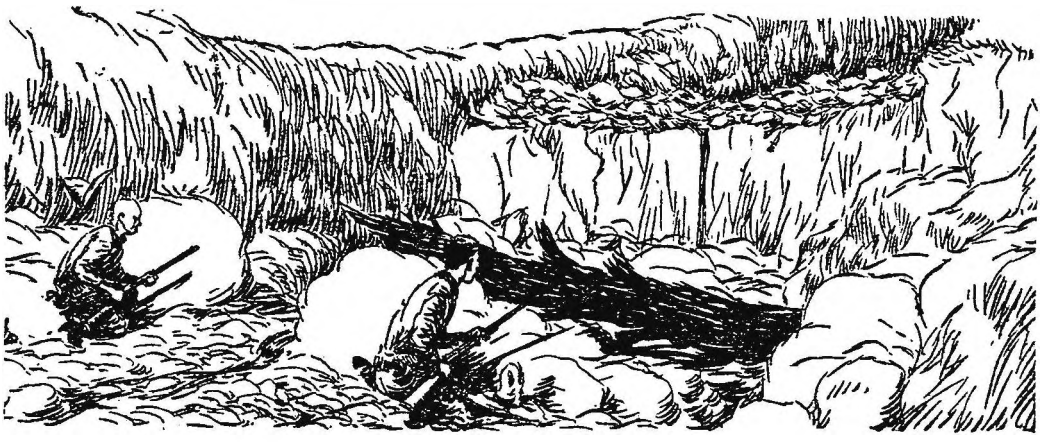


RUNT

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Devil's Gold," "Don Coyote," etc.

ALL HIS YOUNG LIFE "THE RUNT" HAD DREAMED OF THE WEST. AND WHEN FATE AND SAM TREDIGER MADE HIM A SHARER IN THE DESPERATE FIGHT OF THE PALOS VERDES RANCH TO SAVE ITS WATER RIGHTS HE FOUND ALL THE GUNPLAY HE HAD EVER VISIONED—AND SOMETHING ELSE BESIDES

JOE CROSS was only an amateur at beating his way. If he had been a blown-in-the-glass stiff, he would never have got out of his boxcar in broad daylight to fill his bottle at the water tank, especially so near the desert where brakemen renewed their vigilance and took especial delight in ditching a 'bo. He would have restrained his thirst, eked out his allowance despite the terrific heat. But this was Joe's first trip at the expense of the railroad and he had already vowed that it would be his last.

He had courage enough, but lacked the experience to attempt to ride the brake-beams, envying the ease with which he saw other fully fledged knights of the road swing under and in as the train started, nonchalantly adjust their short riding board and settle themselves, cigar stub in the corner of an unshaven mouth, to the miles of jolting and flying grit. He doubted whether he would have sufficient strength to hold on and the prospect of falling beneath the wheels was vivid in his imagination. Blind-baggage meant passenger trains and added risk of discovery and punishment, so that he decided upon patronizing the "side-door" Pullmans.

By the time he had traveled a hundred miles or so, he was fairly adept at spotting an empty, unsealed car and climbing aboard. He had learned how to swing on to a side-ladder and cling there until the long freight halted for water or a siding and then to hop into the car if he had not previously had time to get aboard. He knew how to stand in the shadow of the wheels and trucks in the yards while the wheel-tappers came along with their lanterns. Some of these tricks were taught him by the 'bos who hopped the same train, others he found out by experience.

They were not always friendly, these

men who, like himself, were going west. Two of them had frisked him of his watch, the seventeen dollars that represented his entire capital. They had taken his shoes and rummaged his bundle for what they fancied, leaving him with a clip on the jaw that left him insensible while they jumped off. After that he did his best to avoid them. That he himself was actually stealing when he rode free never occurred to him. It was an adventure, the beginning of the first adventure of his life, and he entered upon it without question of ethics.

Joe was undersized and undernourished and for years he had been overworked—for eleven years out of his twenty-three—ever since his mother had married again and he had acquired a stepfather who did not consider him in any other light but that of a helper who need not be paid wages.

It had been a hard life on the Arkansas farm to which his stepfather had taken them, a long struggle against lack of money, poor soil, poor management, poor food and poor health.

The stepfather had died at last of a heart trouble, aggravated by malaria. Joe, short of stature, denied proper education, had struggled on against debts and the handicaps of uncongenial Nature until his wornout mother died, happy to find release at last.

THE urge that sent him west is, perhaps, not hard to analyse. Most Nordic Americans have heard the whisper, though it may be intermittent in the later generations. Cross had pioneer blood in him. For all his lack of size and the life that had left him improperly matured, there was the leaven of energy and ambition in his spirit, latent though circumstance had left it. Much of the reading he had done had been of Western ways. The phrase "the great open spaces" has been ridiculed, but that has not affected the lure and the effect. His life had been infinitely narrow, the West seemed to hold wider prospects.

It was no easy matter for a backcountry lad to tramp to the nearest railroad yards and swing himself aboard. Save what he had done on the impoverished farm, where methods were crude, he had no trade. And life with its anxieties had sapped at his natural energies. For three years he was everything on the place, his mother an invalid, Joe had been farmer, cook, housecleaner and nurse in one. He might have hired out and earned wages, but he could not leave her.

At the end of the forced sale of the farm and its effects left him nothing after the funeral expenses were paid but twenty-three dollars and fifty cents and a small assortment of shabby, worn clothes.

The sill of the first boxcar that he crossed was the threshold of Adventure to him. He embarked on a voyage into the unknown, unfitted, without definite destination, without charts or experience.

Riding in the empties had not been bad fun in the beginning. He was his own man, he was seeing the world. He bought supplies and lived well enough. Often, when the long freight was swinging along, he could slide back the doors and survey the landscape, the prairie billowing like a sea with the wind brooming the grasses on the undulating ridges. He passed pleasant farms, wide acreage of standing wheat; he stopped off at towns that were to him metropolises, and he traveled always toward the sunset.

BUT it was hard to sleep. After a while the constant jolting began to wear upon his nerves. It was worse when he sat down, with his back to the side of the empty car, or wedged in a corner. Worse yet when he lay down, with his bundle for pillow.

After the beating that the two hobos had given him when they robbed him it was impossible to get a moment's rest. They had kicked Cross for daring to defy them, booted him in the ribs and in the groin. He was not sure that no bones were broken. He had meant to get out when they did and get some food. Now he was not hungry but faint and the heat was tremendous. They had entered a region practically desert, alkaline waste set sparsely with cactus and sage, land from which waves of warm air danced a shimmering saraband that made the distant mountain range seem to float with its base on air.

He ran a fever and emptied his water-bottle before there followed long hours of torment with his body jigging on the hard boards. A sort of coma followed and he came back to consciousness feeling weak and dizzy, his tongue swollen and his lips cracked. The sun was westering, the train slowing down.

He crawled to the door and slid it open. He could see the gleam of water, blue under the sky, running in a little overflow stream alongside the road bed, and could see a wire fence—and desert. He craned out and saw the water-tank. He was well in the middle of the train. Once the fireman brought down the spout and started filling the engine he reckoned he might venture out. He was burning up, his whole system cried for water.

It hurt when he dropped to the roadbed, it was almost agony as he ran to the little stream and filled his bottle after he sucked up a full stomach. The train was moving. Joe thrust the bottle, corked, into his pocket and ran for his car. He was too stiff and sore to fling himself through the door he had left open; he barely managed to clutch the side-ladder and climb up a rung or two, wondering whether he could hold on until the next stop. His side was badly bruised and each jerk was like a stab and a sear from a hot iron.

He did not see the brakeman who had spotted him and who now came hotfoot over the roofs of the cars behind, billy in hand. There were strict orders on that division to carry no 'bos. Men who shacked it across the desert were often of a desperate type. Not long before a brakeman had been shot by one of them. This one meant to take no chances. There were footirons in the car ends. He came down these and up again, leaning round the corner of the car, close to the clinging Joe Cross. He did not know that the self-invited passenger had been beaten up. He looked tough enough and the brakeman knew that size didn't always count for weakness. Billy the Kid was not much bigger than this one. He might have a gun on him and he might not. Anyway, the brakeman had the jump on him and he meant to ride him.

"Git to hell off'n there, you, before I crack you!"

Joe looked at the man vaguely. He was dizzy again and all his energies had been desperately concentrated on holding to the ladder. His eyes were bloodshot, his face had not been shaven for days, he was coated with dust and his face was a mask of alkali, cracked here and there. His voice was a croak as he attempted protest.

"If I hev' to stop the train on you," said the brakeman, "what's left of you'll be breakfast fer the buzzards. Hit the grit, bo!"

JOE looked at the ground. The train was gathering speed. The wind drove against his thin clothing and the brakeman looked at the revealing outline of his body with swift knowledge that he did not pack a gun, hip or shoulder-holster.

"If I have to come to you, I'll bust yore skull," he said. "Hop!"

Joe tried to jump. He was clumsy at best at that sort of thing and his stance was against him. He fell, rolling over and over as the train slid past him. He lay still and the freight went off down the shining rails.

It was morning when he crawled into the town of Vacada, stopping at the creek to drink and wash off dust and blood. He was exhausted, a forlorn and pitiful object that found no pity. To eat he had to get a job. Begging was not his strong suit and there was no charity extended.

The last place he tried was the Prickly Pear *cantina*. It was almost empty when he lurched in. A man was polishing glasses behind the bar, his back to the room. The games, ranged opposite the bar, were shrouded in cloths. Beyond was the dance-hall. with a stand for the musicians at one end and a lunch counter at the other. He could smell coffee and frying ham. He was sick, but hunger reasserted itself. He clutched at the bevel of the bar and the

man saw his haggard and forlorn face in the glass back of it.

"I'm lookin' fer a job," ventured Joe, his voice a feeble croak. "I ain't had anything to eat fer two days, I reckon, an' I'm up against it."

"You look it," said the bartender, without sympathy. "Boss is inside, eatin' his breakfast. You kin tackle him if you like," he added indifferently.

"Bull" Masters' mother was part Mexican, part Indian, his father American. His nature was changeable. He set down his untasted cup of coffee as Joe came in and surveyed him with derision tinged with rising anger.

"What in hell do *you* want?" he demanded.

"A job. Got thrown off the train."

"A bum, eh?"

"I'm willin' to work."

"I don't hire runts. Takes a full-sized man to hold down a job out here, tenderfoot." He swung on his stool and drank his coffee. The Chinese cook set ham and eggs before him, rolls and butter. Joe swayed on his feet at the ravishing odor of it. Masters went on with his meal and complacency filled his being. He needed a roustabout. This one might do and he'd be cheap.

"What kin you do?" he asked presently.

"I've farmed some. I kin handle hosses."

"Bronco buster in disguise?" Masters laughed at his own cheap jest. The Chinaman grinned. "Kin you clean cuspidors, swab floors, wash dishes, make yourself useful? Fer yore board an' sleepin', an' three dollars a week until you show you're worth more?"

It didn't take Joe long to close that sorry bargain. He felt a little better after the Chinaman had fed him in the kitchen but he was in bad shape when he got to his bed at last.

For a week he could hardly drag himself through the long hours of work, up at dawn, on his legs till midnight. Masters did not ask him his name but called him "Runt," and the name stuck. Regular meals helped and, after a while, he was impressed as a sort of bus-boy, clearing the tables, in a rush sometimes acting as waiter, despised where he was not ignored, often made the butt of rude jests—the prime joke of all being his name of "Runt." He had known that he was below the average, but it had never before hurt him, stung what of pride was in him. Now, as he got rid of his bruises, began to gain health and strength, despite the lengthy tasks, he found himself acquiring a sense of resentment, linked with a faint feeling of independence.

HE WAS like one gazing at a pageant. Romance, in a word, meant nothing to Joe Cross, nor could he have given a definition for Adventure, but now he saw the figures of his stories and his dreams—the cowboys in their picturesque garments, their sombreros, their chaparejos, with tinkling spurs and low-swung guns, riding ponies that they brought to a halt all standing from a gallop, ponies that could whirl on a mark the size of a dollar, that leaped off, bucking, when the cowboys mounted them. He saw these punchers swaggering in, some of them grave of usual habit but relaxed within the walls of the Prickly Pear, drinking, gambling, dancing, hilarious, sometimes quarreling, entering carefree and riding off lighthearted, disappearing in clouds of dust that swallowed them as if they had been the phantoms of Joe's imagination.

He was with them but never of them. Of their life on the range he saw nothing, though he heard snatches of talk he pieced together. He was often the butt of their jokes, this tenderfoot who answered to the name of Runt.

If this was Adventure, Runt did not think much of it. His visions had been hazy enough, but here was nothing but the same raw deal that life had always handed out to him. He was in the frame of mind that sometimes turns a lad into a killer like Billy the Kid. It is a dangerous thing to come to believe that Nature has dealt unfairly with one from birth, that the physical odds are against you. An inferiority complex may develop into a fierce determination to show the world you are not afraid of it by making it afraid of you.

Joe had taken a good many lickings

from his stepfather and sometimes from bigger boys. He had fought the last as best he could and, though his body had been beaten, he had never acknowledged in his spirit that they were better than he was. They were better armed, that was all.

The name of Runt rankled like the scraping of a sore but he felt his helplessness against these jaunty riders of the range, self sufficient, assured. They had been his heroes, now they were his tormentors.

There was one of them who seemed different. Sam Trediger, lean, tall, hawk faced and blue of eye, Southern and of drawling dialect, his skin coppered with sun and wind; his action swift and supple, lithe as a cat's in every move. He had barely noticed Joe, but he had never made a joke of him. His face was grave. Sometimes, when he smiled, his white teeth seemed to flash in his brown face and transformed it. He had many friends. But Joe gathered that he had enemies also —Reed of the Double R and his outfit, a hardbitten crowd that usually started any dispute that happened.

Joe did not know the cause of the trouble between Trediger and Reed. There had been no clash in the Prickly Pear. He fancied that Trediger could take care of himself and that Reed, for all his casual sneer and air of wearing a chip on his shoulder, whenever Trediger was present, would be careful not to provoke him, unless he was sure of the advantage.

Reed lost few opportunities to make fun of Joe. There was stinging contempt in the way he called him Runt. That name, Joe fancied, would stick to him as long as he stayed in Vacada. It labeled him in the general estimation. He had random thoughts of going elsewhere, but they did not crystallize. He would always be handicapped in this land where—in the abused phrase—men were men and he a poor specimen.

IT WAS a busy night though still early. The games were well patronized; faro, roulette and poker. The Mexican orchestra played with ardor on fiddle, guitar and Indian drum and the dance hall was beginning to be crowded when the Reed outfit came in and lined up at the bar. Joe, acting as waiter, was glad they had not taken a table. Their jokes were inclined to be too practical, as far as he was concerned and he could see they had already been drinking. He knew their names. Reed, "Buck" Chase. "French" Lanier a cross-eyed, evil faced Canadian halfbreed, "Hunch" Davis, "Tex" Wilson and Stang. Six in all, shaking dice for the drinks, their backs to the crowd, few of whom had greeted them.

Joe took an order and went to the bar to have it filled. The Double R crowd took up half the length of it, Reed nearest the door. Joe stood next to him, not too close. The door opened and Trediger came in alone. Several spoke to him. He asked for five sacks of Durham and a drink of whisky. The bartender filled Joe's tray with liquor glasses and the customary chasers, and he turned to serve them.

At that moment, Reed, shaking off, won, and wheeled around with a gesture that struck Joe's tray with force enough to send most of the glasses to the floor, while one glass leaped up with the impact and sent its contents into Reed's face. He cursed and struck at Joe, who ducked but caught the heavy blow between his shoulders, sending him to his knees. Reed kicked him and he sprawled, cutting his hand as he broke a glass.

Something was loosed within him, as if a trigger had been pulled. He crouched and then leaped at Reed, getting inside his hasty guard and landing his bloody fist on the bully's cheek, leaving a red smear.

Reed's hand shot down towards his gun but Trediger was quicker. His arm shot out and caught Reed's arm at the elbow in a firm grip, preventing the draw. Joe stood back, breathing hard, expecting the shot.

"The kid ain't got a gun, Reed," drawled Trediger. "Reckon you overlooked thet."

"Damn you, let go my arm. *You've* got one. Horn in on me, will you?"

The tense silence and suspended action that always accompanies a gunplay in such a place was broken by the scrape of chairs as men shifted to see what was happening.

"I've got a gun, Reed, but the kid ain't. It warn't his fault to start with. You knocked the tray out of his hands before you knocked him down."

He spoke quietly but every word was distinct as the rap of a hammer on metal. His blue eyes had taken on the glint of a gun barrel. Reed spoke blusteringly. Trediger had released his arm and stood apparently relaxed while Reed stiffened, his hand frozen above his gun butt. A man spoke from the faro table, getting to his feet. Horton, of the Bar H, the biggest cattleman of the district.

"Trediger's right, Reed. You had no call to pick on 'Runt.' No license to draw on him."

It was the first time anyone had taken sides for Joe. The change of attitude bewildered him a little. Reed stood scowling and sneering but his hand did not move. Trediger's right elbow was on the bar. He stood at ease, but his eyes never left Reed's face. The Double R outfit grouped about their Old Man but were hesitant, aware of the general feeling against them, the broken ethics of attempting to use a gun on an unarmed man, if Runt could be so classified.

"He ain't much more'n half yore size, Reed," said Trediger. "I'm nigher yore measure." His tone was even, it lacked a taunt but it suggested willing readiness for action. Reed glared about him. Bull Masters came striding in from the dance hall. His swarthy face darkened at the sight of the wasted liquor.

"Pick those up, you clumsy pup!" he shouted. Automatically Joe obeyed.

"It warn't his fault, Bill," said Trediger quietly. "Reed spilled 'em."

Masters looked from one to the other, uncertain.

"I reckon our trade ain't wanted in here," said Reed. "We'll trail somewheres where the customers stand ahead of the waiters."

That decided Masters. He was not going to lose the trade of the Double R. Trediger had no outfit and he did not gamble. Reed and his riders were free spenders and players.

"I'm runnin' my own shack," he blustered. "You're fired, Runt. Git to hell out of here!"

"Soon as you pay me," answered Joe. His bewilderment had passed. He had asserted himself and his blood was still tingling. Where he would go did not matter. Trediger had defended him. Other men had spoken in his behalf.

"How much does he owe you?" asked Trediger.

"Five weeks at three dollars. Fifteen."

"You sure are liberal, Bull. Reckon you kin pay him." His low voice held determination. Masters thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out a roll of bills.

"Two dollars out for the drinks an' busted glasses," he said.

"Reed 'll pay for 'em," said Trediger. Reed started to say something but several men were standing up now. He had played the bully and he knew it. He flung two silver dollars on the bar as Masters handed Joe three five-dollar bills.

"Out of here before I kick you out!" he roared.

"Thet's what started the trouble, Bull. Too much kicking." Masters whirled on Trediger who did not move but smiled at him, and Masters checked his impulse. "You got an outfit here?" Trediger asked Joe.

"What I'm standin' in." The statement was literally true. He had patched up his torn clothes as best he could, meaning to buy new ones at the end of the month when Masters had promised but failed to pay him. He had lost his hat when he was ordered off the freight.

"Then I reckon we'll shack along," said Trediger. He nodded to his friends in the crowd, turned his back on Reed and went out. Joe followed, wondering what Trediger had meant by the friendly "we."

"Know where you kin land a job?" the puncher asked.

"I had hard work landin' thet one. I don't amount to much out here, I guess."

"Ain't found yorese'f yit, likely. Ride any?"

"I used to ride the colts back on the farm. Bareback."

"Don't happen to sabe anything about cookin' do you?"

"I kin cook ordinary vittles. Mebbe I could run yore shack fer you."

"I wouldn't wonder. We could make a try at it. Me an' my pardner, Baldy Burton, we ain't neither of us much good with a stove or a broom, an' we're busy most of the time. Can't afford to pay you much, but I kin double what Bull was givin' you. It ain't my money I'm spendin'. you see. But the grub's good an' I reckon you won't have to rustle as hard as you did here. How about it?"

"I'd work fer you fer nothin'," Joe blurted out. Fortune seemed to have suddenly spun its whirligig in his favor. To live with a rider like Trediger, work for him and his partner Baldy Burton was like a dream beginning to come true! Trediger gave him a full smile as they stood outside the *cantina.*

"I come in with the buckboard," he said. "Fer supplies. Here's the rig. Hop in."

Joe had barely struck the seat when Trediger was beside him. The tall puncher made no unnecessary moves, his actions seemed effortless and half those of other men. He released the brake with one hand and held the plunging team with the other.

It looked to Joe for a moment as if they were running away as they headed straight through the sage flat, out toward the foothills. But they were under the control of those wrists, strong as steel and supple as whalebone.

"Bin standin'," he said. "Buckskins. Best to let 'em run."

The wind was in their faces, laden with the spice of sage, the tang of piñon and cedar from the hills. Bright, steady stars shone overhead. Back of the range the moon was rising. Joe felt as if he had been plunged into a cleansing bath, soothing alike to body and spirit.

"We've got fifteen miles to go, old timer," said Trediger. "An' it don't take much over an hour to make it. I'm holdin' down the Palos Verdes homestead. Spanish grant it really is, in the mouth of Cabesos Canyon, right underneath thet notch where the moon's goin' to show in a few minutes."

THE "old timer" warmed Joe. It was a title he had no right to, but he knew it for a term of friendship. Trediger, he fancied, was several years older than he was. He could not conceive why he should be interested in him.

"Runt, I take it, ain't yore reg'lar name?"

"It's what they call me. Bull Masters started it. I reckon I am a runt. They handed me out short measure."

"Size don't measure man. Handicaps you in a rough an' tumble, but short men air often quick. If you kin think an' act together, so long's you've got good eyesight an' air gener'ly sound, you ought to git along. We've got somethin' out here thet makes all men equal, providin' they've got nerve an' learn how to use it. You've got the guts. You want to git you a gun an' practice with it till you git the hang of it. Comes to some natural. It ain't so much usin' it as folks knowin' you kin, quick an' straight. Reed sort of figgers I kin beat him to the draw. I figger the same way myse'f. He warn't anxious to determine the p'int, specially as he'd shown himse'f wrong by startin' a gunplay on you. You'll need a gun if you figger to stick around. An' I reckon it won't be long befo' you kin look anyone thet miscalls you plumb in the eye an' tell 'em yore real name, an' not to fergit it."

"My name's Joe Cross. The hull crowd of 'em knows me as Runt."

"They won't. A five dollar gold piece ain't nigh the size of a silver peso but it's sure worth more an' lasts longer. It's my notion you ain't counterfeit or I wouldn't ask you to come out to Palos Verdes. It's a right peaceful place—to look at—but I ain't so sure but what there'll be excitement round there befo' long. You git you a gun an' I'll give you

some pointers on how to handle it. Baldy kin give you more."

"I don't know as I've got enough money to git me a gun," said Joe. "I've jest got the fifteen dollars. I've got to git me some clothes."

"I'll loan you a gun, Joe." It was good to be called by his own name again. "I tote two myse'f on occasions, an' so does Baldy, but, at thet, I've got an extry. We've got quite a li'l' arsenal out to the ranch. You kin buy you some jeans an' ca'tridges. You should have a pair of reg'lar boots, but I kin advance you fer them. Sounds like war talk," he added, "but Baldy's got a motter—in time of peace ile up yore artillery. An' you might as well know where we stand at Palos Verdes.

"I told you it was an old Spanish grant. All those titles ain't bin settled. They was big tracts, to commence with, thousands of *varas*, an', when Kearney marched into Santa Fé an' run the Stars an' Stripes up in the plaza, our gov'nmint confirmed the Americans thet held 'em, after Santa Ana got walloped an' Texas an' New Mexico was properly ceded. So you see they date back quite a piece. Palos Verdes was given to George Whiting, who was one of the old trappers like Kit Carson, an' St. Vrain, an' Bent, who went in fer land holdin'. Bent was made governor of New Mexico an' it ain't likely he wouldn't see his friend warn't protected in every way. Whiting sold off a lot of his land an' title ain't bin disputed.

"But I'll admit there have been troubles over the same sort of grants where the holders hev' lost out. Courts went agin 'em. The descriptions are all-fired vague an' liberal. Cows was worth about three to the dollar those days, and they handed out land like they was spreadin' dirt from a shovel. Boundaries ain't clear, often as not. No surveys run. So they're allus open to dispute. Main thing Whiting an' his heirs have, I reckon, is the fact of having had free an' undisputed possession fer the past seventy odd years. Thet's the bone in the stew, as Baldy ses. Possession. It's ninety-nine p'ints of the law an' it ain't allus hard, with a good talkin' lawyer an' an easy listenin' jedge to win the last p'int.

"All serene while the Whitings—father, son an' grandson—was alive. They were the fightin' kind. Now it's left to some feller back East who's a cousin or a nevvy—I ain't certain about the particulars—by the name of Cecil Whiting.

"This Cecil is comin' out, sooner or later. Seems he's got a job on some sort of contract thet ties him up. Smithers, over to Los Altos, is the Whiting lawyer an' he acquaints the said Cecil thet Palos Verdes is his, him bein' the next of kin, cordin' to the will Jud' Whiting writes on a sheet of paper jest before he died. Will was all reg'lar accordin' to law. Cecil writes back fer Smithers to have someone put in charge of the ranch until he arrives. There's some money in bank, not a lot, fer Jud Whiting was a good spender, but enough to send mebbe a thousan' to Cecil an' to pay fer caretakin'.

"I'm the third caretaker. Me an' Baldy. The rest got run off or persuaded to leave, *pronto*. There's two of us, there'll be three with you. Main trouble, so far, is keepin' yore eyes skinned. Baldy an' me, we ain't had much sleep lately.

"Palos Verdes is a mighty sweet place. It's the homestead, picked as the ch'ice place on the ranch by Whiting. He built him a fine house an' the buildin's are all good, Spanish style, dobe' an plaster, with tile roofs. Palos Verdes means green trees an' there's plenty of shade an' Cabesos Crick runs out of the canyon summer an' winter long. 'Bout two mile out, still on the ranch, an' inside the wire, it begins to seep in. There's a spell of *malpais* an' sand an' the crick ends in a shaller lake. Land ain't worth the price of a burned match in hell without water, whether you farm it or run cattle on it. Reed owns the land next. There's water on it, but it ain't good. One crick's bitter an' both of 'em are small an' fail in the dry spells.

"Reed would like Palos Verdes, at least the land the crick waters. He gits a slant at the original grant an' sees a loophole thet a shady lawyer might drive through, providin' Reed gits possession. With this Cecil hombre absent, he figgers he's got a chance. Once he got on it, he'd hold it till his lawyer cooks up the stew an' picks the right jedge. Reed kin afford to pay handsome fer the water. He's got a heap of cows an' a heap of brands. Claims to be a dealer an' does some buyin'. There's talk thet he don't pay fer all he grazes, but nothin' proven.

"Thet's the situation, Joe. Cecil may be along any day. He won't know the first thing about ranchin', an' a ranch has got to be run right these days to make it pay. The thing thet puzzles me is why he don't try to sell it? If he works it, he may want us to stay on, seein' we've kep' it fer him.

"Now you've got the outline. Reed may try an' run us off. If he does, there'll be smoke. The law's kinder hit-an'-miss down this way. No depitty at Vacada, an' the sheriff at Altos is a shirt stuffed with straw an' a star pinned on it. Git enough licker under the belts of Reed's outfit an' they'll likely make a play.

"If thet don't appeal to you, Joe, say so an' no hard feelin's. I'd like to have you. We need someone to sort of housekeep fer us, but I ain't aimin' to jest make a chorehand out of you. I liked the way you went for Reed, though it was blamed pore jedgment to tackle a man who's reachin' fer his gun when you ain't packin' one. You sleep over it tonight an' tomorrer, we'll decide."

Joe believed he had decided already. He might not make good, but the prospects of trouble did not give him any tremors. He found himself rather looking forward to it, anxious to prove himself. The pioneer leaven within his quickened. Trediger thought him worth while and Trediger could not be improved upon. Trediger was a knight of the range, fearless and self possessed. And there was Baldy Burton, quick and sure on the trigger.

"There's an extry saddle," said Trediger, "an' plenty of hawsses. You'll git some ridin'. Right now it's what they call watchful waitin' in this war. Reed may not start anything, after all. The men who first held down the job, caretakin', were not the sort who welcome trouble. Old Man Pell used to run the change station fer the stage, an' Davis was helper to the livery stable in Vacada. They got scared off with notes pinned to the door nights, an' a few shots round about sun-up. If anything breaks, I reckon it'll be after dark. But we keep a lookout days, jest the same. They might take a notion to run off what there is of the herd. Jud' Whiting sold off a lot of beef but there's some left. He got to gamblin' in ile stocks. Cecil ain't got a fortune in plain sight, but it kin be brought back. Trouble is, a ranch takes capital. Even when the range is good there's some wages an' grub to take care of. The three-year-olds have all been called out an' some of the two-year-olds. You can't sell old cows fer much an' if you do you lose yore increase. You've either got to have money or hands thet'll work fer nothin' an' not be fancy eaters."

THEY were among the outlying foothills, now, low ridges splotched with dark clumps of brush. Presently they stopped for a moment while Joe hopped out and opened a gate, closing it again after the buckboard had passed through.

"We're inside Palos Verdes wire," said Trediger. "See Baldy's light shinin' out of the winder soon. He'll be waitin' up fer me."

Joe thought he detected a note of anxiety in the other's voice, but he made no comment. Now he began to make out the forms of cattle, some of them lying down contentedly chewing their cuds, others drifting off like shadows. He was as thrilled at sight of them as if they had been buffalo. They were a part of the land to which he had come from inner promptings and which at last seemed about to receive him as a welcome guest.

"It must be a hard job keepin' tally on those cows," he said. "Jest the two of you to do it an' guard the house."

"It sure is. You've hit the nail plumb on the head. Me an' Baldy 've been keepin' eight-hour shifts, one ridin' herd, one at the house. Didn't dare leave the house

becos, after all, thet's the main thing to hang onto. One who was herdin' would have to ride back, but we kep' 'em well away from wire. Only of course we had to git *some* sleep. Ate separate, mos'ly. If you stay, we could work it so's the man in the house could git a spell of sleep an' you could give the alarm, if there was any. There's the light in the house now."

This time there was unmistakable relief in his voice He was not a nervous type, to be lightly alarmed, and his evident pleasure in seeing the light shining in the window did more than all the talk to convince Joe that the puncher expected serious and imminent trouble. He felt something akin to a thrill of actual exultation, a reaction to the suggestion of danger that was exhilarating rather than depressing. It was new to Joe. He had face trouble plenty of times, dull, deadly, daily trouble of debt and despondency; but there had never been any thrill to that continuous and monotonous combat. Now, riding on through the night toward the light, the walls of the canyon gradually closing in about them, a creek shining like molten silver under the moon, running with a noisy rush not far from the road, the puncher beside him guiding the spirited buckskins that had quickened their gait on approaching home, Joe knew a new sensation. He was getting a kick out of life. Joe had come into his own country. He might be a runt and a tenderfoot, but he belonged, just the same.

"I don't have to sleep over thet," he said suddenly to Trediger. And his voice was firm with conviction. "If you kin stand my cookin', I'll stay."

"Good fer you!"

The buckboard came to a standstill.

They had been driving fast through shadow to where a bend in the canyon left the road in full moonlight. For a second Joe did not know what had happened. A horseman had seemed to materialize out of the darkness on Trediger's side of the rig, issuing a hissed command to halt.

"What's up, Baldy?" Joe's pulses had quickened but Trediger's words were quiet and even. Trediger'd be that way, Joe told himself, whatever the emergency. He was swiftly investing Trediger with all the virtues.

"Nothin' much. Who you got with ye?" Joe felt himself subjected to keen scrutiny, though he could make little out of the mounted figure.

"Brought out a cook, Baldy."

"Thank God fer thet. I've had indigestion all day, long of them pancakes of yore'n. You left out the sody."

"Name's Cross, Joe Cross, Baldy. This is my pardner, Baldy Burton, Joe. Joe's by way of bein' a tenderfoot, Baldy, but he'll soon git over it. He smacked Reed's face fer him tonight, an'——"

Baldy chuckled in the darkness.

"Seein' he's still live, I wish I'd bin there to see it! Reed in town, eh? All his outfit with him?"

"I didn't see Landers or Mott."

"Huh!" The grunt was eloquent. It was clear that Baldy had not left the house without due reason, and Joe could not exactly follow the talk which he was sure was pertinent.

"I reckon it's Mott," Baldy went on. "He's the sharpshooter of thet outfit. Mebbe Landers is next best. The rest goes in town fer a blind. Mebbe they was jest runnin' a rankiboo on us, like they did to Pell an' Davis. Mebbe they meant business. Best not go in the front way, Sam. I left the light burnin' to fool 'em, keep 'em sot, an' come to tip you off. They ain't seen me. I come soft an' dark."

It was exasperating, this roundabout talk of peril in the night. Trediger did not seem to mind it.

"Jest what are they up to?" he asked.

"Got their sights lined on the front door, Sam lined 'em up by daylight, I reckon, figgered out the range to a yard, sot their rifle. High-powered, I reckon. An' fired from nigh to the same level as the door. Thet'd make it about the ledge on Reed's land he's kivvered with brush. Nigh three-quarters of a mile. Dern nice shootin' I didn't investigate none. There's too much

open space an' I reckon there's two of 'em, one with his rifle clamped to cover the door an' the other with his handy fer a snapshot. Though it may be jest bluff, tryin' to scare us off.

"I was in the back, washin' dishes. I didn't set the light in the front winder right after it's dark, knowin' you wouldn't be back fer a spell. I was rattlin' pans an' mebbe I missed a shot or two. But when I finally puts the light on the table there comes a sound like a rap on the front door. I didn't hear any report thet time, either. Wind an' distance an' the walls killed it. But I didn't open the door, no tellin' what kind of a visitor it might be. You see thet door's mighty thick an' it's hard wood, but jest the same I see a splinter bulgin' an' there was a bullet mushroomed back of it.

"If I'd opened the door, or if me or you or the new cook here was to pass through it, we'd be liable to a case of plumbago in the back. Some chance of 'em takin' a snipe at you while you're crossin' where the moon hits the road, but it'll be long shootin' an' I'll bet a month's pay they've got the rifle set tight fer the door."

"We'll take the chance of that, Baldy. An' we'll go in the back way tonight. Way they fired, I figger they're jest tryin' to rattle us. Thet the on'y shot they took?"

"One every fiftten minutes, reg'lar. I was outside an' I could jest catch the crack of the rifle. Every one a hit. Bullets vary a leetle on account of the wind blowin' down the canyon, but you could kivver all of 'em with yore hand, I reckon. Jest about chest high."

"Head high, fer me," said Joe. He was not without his qualms at this direct evidence of danger, but they passed. Baldy chuckled again. A likable chuckle.

"Guess the cook ain't *too* much of a tenderfoot" he said. "I'll give you a lead."

HE SET spurs to his mount, and horse and rider raced ahead along the illumined road. Nothing happened. The buckboard followed at a fast clip, swung off into a lane between corrals, out of it, round to the rear of the main building, low but spacious, built of adobe plastered and white washed, its roof tiled, its windows deep set and barred with carved grilles of wood. At the rear an inner patio was shut off by big gates. These were heavily reinforced with straps and hinges of wrought iron and by a bar that went clear across, furnished with padlocks. Baldy opened up. The buckboard was driven inside. Joe saw the house was built in the form of a hollow square. Shade roofs ran around three sides, there was a pool in the center that was filled with living water that overflowed in a little trough. Vines on the roof posts, shrubs and flowers that gave off perfume, a starry mass of jasmine emitting incense by the gates.

"Took a chance they might try to git in while I was gone," said Baldy. "But the light was burnin' an' they didn't see me leave. I didn't know Reed was to town."

Joe helped unload the buckboard of supplies, went out to the corral where he demonstrated that he knew harness. Then he returned to the house with Trediger. They examined the bullet marks in the front door. Trediger flung it open, but there was no response. There the marks were plainer.

"Jest notice to quit," said Trediger as he closed the door.

The three of them sat down together in the great room that ran across the entire front of the house. At either end the floor was raised the height of three steps, and there were two great fireplaces. The furnishings were old Spanish, unique, valuable and beautiful. Indian rugs were used for carpets and hangings; there were trophies of horns on the walls and one or two oil paintings dark with age. There was Indian basketry and a collection of Indian weapons, with here and there some rare specimens of pottery. On either side of the door was a modern touch—a rack for rifles. Eight of them in all, four of them Winchesters, two smaller- calibered, high-powered rifles, and two shotguns.

"You see we live snug," said Trediger. "Got a bedroom apiece, until Cecil comes, anyway."

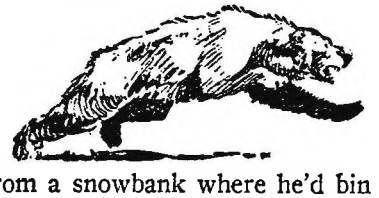
Baldy growled something inarticulate. The name Cecil seemed to arouse his wrath. He had taken off his sombrero and

Joe saw a head as destitute of hair as a billiard ball, hair long since fallen, for the skin matched the mahogany of his face, though it was smooth save for the ruffle of a long scar running transversely across it. He sat puffing at a corncob pipe and, under the cover of its smoke screen Joe was aware of a close and not unfriendly scrutiny. At Baldy's growl he met the other's gaze.

"Cecil!" he exclaimed. "Kin you imagine callin' a man-child Cecil? You lookin' at my bald head? Don't apologize. I'm used to it. Tell you how I got it.

"I was out one time—in the winter it was, an' me on snow shoes—climbin' Cumbre Pass, lookin' fer fresh meat. Had to keep the lock of my rifle wropped to prevent it freezin'. Powerful cold it was. Colder than I imagined, though my nose got friz six or seven times. You couldn't tell the pass from the range, an' I trailed free, fetchin' up in some high timber the wind kep' from bein' covered, figgerin' there'd be game there.

"There was. Not the kind I was lookin' fer. I hadn't seen no sign, so my rifle was still wropped when out pops a great griz-



zly from a snowbank where he'd bin winterin'. I figger he might've rolled in with his mate an' she got restless an' they had a row an' he got turned out.

"He was sure riled. Probably hungry, havin' nothin' but a pine knot in his stomach to prevent it closin' up on him. He saw me an' reckoned I was his meat.

"Son, I was plumb skeered. I ain't ashamed to say it. I lugged at the rifle, but my hands was gittin' numb an' he was comin' fer me gee-whizzin'. My hair riz up. It was long them days an' it stood up like porkypine quills. Lifted the sombrero plumb off'n my head. I got the gun free the last second, jest as he swiped at me. Clawed me on top my head an' plumb wiped off all my hair. You see it was like so many long knittin' needles an' the fright was so sudden it must have drug the roots through the skin. The blood friz as it run down my face. I cracked it off later. There was my ha'r lyin' on the snow, all bruk off.

"And there was the b'ar. I was a bit dazed. I reckon if I could've rubbed thet b'ar's grease on right away it might've sprouted, but the carkiss was so hard his fur was solid an' I bruk my knife tryin' to open him up. The cold sp'iled its temper. I couldn't tote the b'ar whole, so I had to leave it lie. A blizzard come up later an' I had no chance of findin' it. By thet time I hed got me an elk. I had a terrible cold in my head fer quite a spell, but thet's how I lost my ha'r, an' there's the scar to prove it."

"You said there were trees," said Joe. "Couldn't you light a fire an' thaw things out?"

Trediger slapped his thigh and laughed. Baldy sat with twinkling eyes.

"I reckon you'll do to take along," he said. "You're quick, son, but you see this was in Arizony, nigh the Grand Canyon. Them trees was petrified."

"I heard yore wife took a club to you, time you got thet scar," said Trediger.

"You got the story mixed with the she-grizzly. Reckon I'll ride herd."

"I reckon we'll let them take their chance, Baldy. Better stick to the house. You kin set up a while an' then I'll watch. They'll have a hard time routin' us out of here. If we didn't hev thet pool in the patio it might be different. And we've got grub enough now."

"An' a cook. I got nine aigs today. Let's have ham an' aigs fer breakfast. Last time you burned the ham to a cinder. Show Cross where he sleeps, Sam. I guess you're right about holdin' the house. Wonder what Cecil 'll do if they keep it up?"

"Likely quit, if he ever takes possession. I'll take a look at the herd in the mornin', after chow. You kin drive, Joe? Those buckskins air easy to handle if you give 'em their heads at the start. You ain't likely to git inter trouble in the mornin' from the Double R outfit. So you might go in an' git you some clothes, boots, an' ca'tridges. I'm goin' ter loan him one of my guns, Baldy. You kin show him how ter use it. Git forty-fives, Joe. And call

at the post office. Mail comes in tomorrer early. We might be hearin' from Whiting. Smithers said he'd likely write or wire us direct."

"Better tote in some pillers fer him to ride on," growled Baldy. "What gun air you loanin' to Cross?"

Trediger got up and crossed the room to the nearer arms rack. Four revolvers hung beneath it. He selected one and brought it back.

"Lemme see yore hand," said Baldy. Joe gave it to him and the old puncher examined it carefully, then took the gun, broke it and spun the well oiled cylinder.

"Gotter keep it clean," he said. "Clean mine twice a day. First thing is to know how to grip it. Yore hand's smaller 'n mine. Let me fit it round the butt. So.

"I used to fan my gun," he said, "but I used both hands an' there's times when you need a gun in each of 'em. So I filed down my triggers instead. It ain't yore finger thet does the work, son. You want to squeeze, take up the pull gradual. This is an easy one. Soon you'll git to know jest when you've got the last fraction to go. Easier the pull, the straighter the aim. Squeeze with the ball of yore thumb an' yore p'am more 'n you do with yore trigger finger. Don't do to deflect the muzzle. Practice does it; on the draw, shootin' from the hip, comin' up, snappin' down or straight-armed. You git yore cartridges an' we'll have a go at it tomorrer. Ever shoot any at all?"

"Some, with a shotgun. Ducks an' rabbits. I got a deer one time with the old man's rifle, but he wouldn't let me use it agen, though I on'y used one shell."

"How often did you miss?"

Joe flushed.

"Not very often," he said truthfully.

"Good! Crack shots air born thataway. We'll try you on the rifles tomorrer. An' I reckon we'll make a pistol shot out of you. Now you better turn in."

JOE slept soundly that night. He woke up blinking at his strange surroundings, wondering where he was. He got up, seeing nothing of Trediger or Baldy, finding his way to the kitchen where there was wood piled by the stove, cans on shelves, utensils scrupulously clean.

He found the coffee, the eggs and the ham, mixed up some biscuits and had breakfast going when Trediger came into the kitchen.

"I'll set the table, Joe," he said. "We'll eat in style. Me an' Baldy'll wash the dishes. Thet's all right. Thet ain't the cook's job, an' it'll save time. You'll want to git to town early. Here's fifteen pesos in advance, fer yore boots. You won't need chaps an' I've got spurs. I'll catch up a hawss fer you while you're gone. Thet breakfast sure smells good."

Baldy ate prodigiously. There was honey to go with the biscuits and he devoured them like a hungry wolf. Trediger did full justice to the meal that had turned out perfectly.

Baldy caught the buckskins and stood by to help while Joe hitched them. They started on the run and he let them go. The road to town was plain and he drove along in high spirits. At Vacada he passed the Prickly Pear at eight o'clock, too early for that institution to show any signs of life, save a curl of smoke from the chimney where the Chinese cook was at work.

The store was open and he bought his jeans after some trouble in getting his size and a kidding from the proprietor. At the last he had to turn up the pants in deep cuffs, also the sleeves.

"Heerd you was fired, Runt. Git you a new job?"

Joe let the "Runt" pass. Some day he would tote a gun and tell them his name was "Joe Cross, an' not to fergit it." That would come. Meantime the stare of the storekeeper as he bought boots and cartridges satisfied him. The man's jaw sagged when he said he was working for Trediger at Palos Verdes.

"Workin' fer Sam Trediger? You drive in alone?"

"Seemed thet way to me. Why?"

The other whistled but he stopped kidding and treated his customer with a new respect.

"He'll have thet piece of news all over town, time I git out," Joe told himself with inward satisfaction.

At the post office there was one letter addressed to Samuel Trediger. In the corner of the envelope was the printed return address of

Blackstone Smithers,
Councillor at Law
Los Altos,
N. M.

That would be important. It was a long envelope and felt as if it contained an enclosure. It might be news of Cecil Whiting. He had finished his errands and was ready to get back.

As he passed the store the owner came out on the stilted sidewalk and hailed him.

"Better go to the depot. Agent was up here jest now to leave word fer Trediger there was a telegram come fer him. Told him you was workin' fer 'em an' would git it."

It was only a short distance. The agent saw him through his window and came out with the message in his hand.

"Reckon you'd better wait," he said. "I'll read it to you. Comes from Denver, and says:

"Arriving Thursday on Mission Special. Please meet me Vacada.

Cecil Whiting."

"She's due here at 9:27," said the agent. "Runnin' twenty minutes late. Yore dude'll be real upset if he ain't met."

There was not time to go to the ranch and back. Doubtless Whiting had written to Smithers and there had been delay in forwarding, but had wired to Trediger direct. There was only one thing to do. Wait.

He tied the buckskins in the shade, more flustered at the idea of meeting the owner of Palos Verdes than at the prospect of holding the ranch against Reed and his riders. Also, he might be out of his new job, footloose again, with fifteen dollars he had spent for his boots drawn in advance. Whiting would let him work that out, he fancied. Hoped, anyway. He speculated on what the newcomer would be like, picturing him a typical city dude but not easily reconciling that with the fact that the "dude" was coming out West to hold down a ranch. Perhaps he thought he knew all about it, considered himself infinitely superior.

HE SAT in the shade. The agent had enclosed the message in an envelope and gone back to his work. Joe could hear the ticking of his telegraph instrument. He wondered if the man would do anything if he knew that Joe had ridden to Vacada ticketless, send a message about him? Probably not. Joe rolled himself a cigarette and settled down to wait.

After a while the agent came out again.

"She's makin' up her time," he said. "Be here inside of twenty minutes."

Joe got up and flecked off some dust. He was glad he had got his jeans to cover his old clothes. He didn't flatter himself that he looked very Western or important, but he could drive Whiting all right. He liked horses and he had had no trouble with the buckskins. The agent stood on the platform looking toward town, shading his eyes against the glare of the sun on the dusty road.

"You're the chap they call Runt, ain't you?" he asked.

"They've been callin' me thet—so fur."

There was an edge to his tone and the agent looked at him curiously.

"No offence meant. You smacked Reed in the face last night, didn't you? Made him bleed?"

"It was the blood off my own hand, where I'd cut it"

"Well, Reed 'lows he'll let some of yours befo' he's through with you. I reckon you're nervy, but Reed's got a mean rep' an' he's ridin' this way now, with a couple of his men. No, he's left them at the *cantina*. I reckon he's comin' here to see about some cars. You ain't heeled, are you?"

"I ain't got a gun with me. Didn't have last night."

"But Trediger did, an' he ain't here. You'd better come inside an' stay outa sight. I'll git him away soon's I kin. Mebbe he'll leave befo' the train comes."

"I ain't hidin' none," said Joe

"Well, you got more sand than I have." He hesitated and stood in his doorway. Reed came loping up and passed by Joe, apparently not recognizing the seated figure in blue jeans nonchalantly smoking a cigarette, though Joe's pose was not as easy as it seemed. He was not hunting trouble. He guessed that Reed had been kidded about his encounter enough to make him keen to wipe out the sting of it and Reed's disposition was never amiable, and still less likely to be so in the morning after a night spent mostly at the Prickly Pear. But Reed went by, got out of the saddle and went into the depot. Ten minutes passed. Reed's companions were still at the *cantina.* Joe sensed trouble, but he had to face it. Trediger had called him "old-timer." He would do his best to prove up on that title.

The train whistled at the crossing. He could see a jet of vapor down the track, then the train itself. He stood up again and walked to the edge of the platform. Reed came out with some papers in his hand, stowing them away in a wallet, and at last catching fair sight of Joe.

"It's *you,* is it?" he said. "I've bin hopin' I'd run inta you. Now I'm goin' to smack yore face inter pulp."

Joe hadn't a chance but he stood his ground as Reed jumped for him. He dodged, was quick on his feet, and Reed

almost went over the platform's edge. Then the agent thrust his head out the window he flung up.

"Hey, leave thet chap lone! Hear me?"

"You 'tend yore own business!"

"It *is* my business, Reed. Thet chap's here to meet a passenger, 'count of a telegram. You're on railroad property. You tech him an' you'll light right in trouble, you bowlegged bully! You kin monkey with some folks, mebbe, but you'd best not monkey with the railroad!"

Reed glared, the allusion to his legs and his disposition not tending to mollify him. But the agent had something on his side. It didn't pay to monkey with the railroad, not when one shipped over it and cars were often scarce. This was railroad property, the buckboard was on it as well as Joe. And he was waiting for a passenger. The passenger could be no one but the owner of Palos Verdes. Reed curbed himself with an effort.

"I'll see who he's waitin' fer," he said. "Mebbe I'll have somethin' to say to both of 'em before I git through."

The train came in, pulled to a halt, the engine panting, as if indignant at being made to stop at such an insignificant place, eager to be away.

A colored porter swung off, white coated, agile, set down his step and deposited on the platform——

One suitcase of black leather with brown straps.

One case of patent leather with black straps, square.

One handgrip.

From the baggage car there came a wardrobe trunk.

Down the steps, assisted vaguely by the porter's extended arm, there tripped lightly a vision that left the three men goggling in amazement as the porter climbed nimbly aboard and closed up his steps, while the fussing conductor gave the high sign to the waiting engineer.

Cecil Whiting had arrived at Vacada.

Not even quite as tall as Joe Cross. Petite, dainty, self possessed, looking at them in a manner that increased their embarrassment. A girl in a trim traveling suit with a close fitting hat over hair that barely showed beneath the brim. Silk stockinged, slender legs with ankles like a fawn; a boyish figure, dark eyes, short, straight nose and red lips that were parted a little in a hint of amusement that revealed itself in her glance.

She addressed herself to Reed, overlooking Joe in his blue jeans and the agent with his official brass-badged cap.

"Are you from Palos Verdes? I am Cecil Whiting."

Reed swept off his sombrero. His surprise had given way to a look that was half derisive, half gloating, as he took in the girl's dainty charm.

"I'd take you most anywhere's Miss," he said. And then Joe struck in.

"I'm from Palos Verdes, m'm. I'm here to meet you."

She gave him a glance and a little nod, her gaze going back to Reed. He must have represented the West to her with his trappings, his bronzed face, his lithe body and bold face. An effective figure, but not all to her liking. Her look would have made most men wince. But Reed was not that sort

"The Runt claims he's from Palos Verdes," he said. "Last night he was rustlin' drinks down to the Prickly Pear. I reckon you'd better let me see you to the ranch, Miss. You sort of took my breath away at first. I reckon you allus would, the way you look. But——"

"I am sorry," she said distinctly, "to have met you as my first Westerner to speak to. I always thought they were gentlemen." She turned to Joe with a smile, while Reed narrowed his eyes, his face going livid. "I'm sorry, but I didn't quite catch your name."

Joe took off his new hat. It was not a Stetson, but it looked well enough.

"He miscalled me. It's Joe Cross. The buckboard's waitin'. I'll put yore things in."

"I'll give you a hand," said the agent. "Got a truck right here fer the trunk, you'll back up to the platform."

"I reckon I'll ride with you," said Reed. "Jest to see you arrive at the right place."

HE LEERED at her as she flashed a look of disdain at him. She bit her lip and followed Joe and the agent carrying her things. Reed mounted and watched the loading of the trunk.

"Do we have to stand for him?" she asked Joe.

Joe was pale, his lips set in a tight line.

"I'll git rid of him in a minute," he said. "Will you git in?"

She mounted readily, Joe got in beside her, released the brake and called to the buckskins who broke into a run.

"I kin handle 'em," he said to the girl. She nodded.

Reed, on his big bay, galloped beside them.

"Thought you was better at washin' dishes, Runt," he called.

At the store Joe halted the team. The owner came out, staring at the girl though not rudely.

"I bought a hat an' boots here with the ca'tridges," said Joe. "I ain't wore 'em none to speak of. Will you take 'em back an' trade 'em fer a gun—thet's loaded?"

The man looked from Joe and the girl to where Reed sat on his horse, a mocking smile on his face.

"I don't know thet it'll do you much good," he said, "but I'll loan you one an' welcome. Trediger kin bring it back. I'll like to know if the lady gits through all right. You're bound fer the ranch?"

"Yep," said Joe. "Gimme the gun."

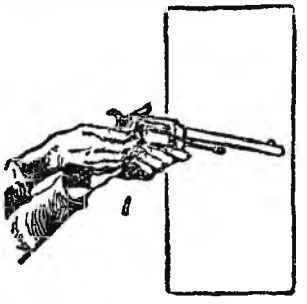
While the other went inside the store, Joe sat tight-lipped. He supposed he was making a grandstand play, that Reed was laughing at him, but he meant to use the gun if he had to, to save the girl from annoyance. He had seen something in the Double R owner's face that he hoped she had not seen. If Cecil Whiting had turned out to be a man, instead of this slim and pretty girl whose very presence made Joe feel awkward and bashful, the Reed plans against Palos Verdes might have dropped. Not now. They might be transferred from the ranch to the girl, or the two joined in one objective, but Reed meant mischief, beastly mischief.

And Joe meant to stop it, if he went down himself. He was still invested with the glamor of the swift change in his circumstances, and now the arrival of Cecil Whiting had brought another magic touch that lifted his life above and beyond the commonplace into the realm of romance, of high thoughts and daring deeds. If Trediger was here—— But then Reed would never have dared to force himself on the girl, to utter the none too covert threat about seeing she arrived at the right place. It was up to him, the Runt.

Reed would hardly try and start anything in town, he decided. If the girl could drive, and the buckskins went steadily enough on their way home, he would have his hands free, and he meant to shoot. If he was killed it might check Reed. The thought was quixotic but it came naturally

enough as he glanced at the girl beside him. Her head was held up, poised on a rounded neck like a flower on its stalk, her color was high and her eyes shining. Sweet and dainty beyond his ken. And plucky. Joe had never in his life even dreamed of such a being. He felt himself coarse and clumsy but fired with a determination to protect her at all hazards.

"Here's my gun. She's some tender on the trigger. I wouldn't use it if I was you unless I was some of an expert," the storekeeper told him.



There was direct warning in the little speech. Reed overheard it and laughed.

"You want to be plumb sure it don't go off too late, Runt."

The girl spoke again, this time to the storekeeper.

"I don't know who this man is," she said, "or if he makes it a habit to insult women. I don't want to see any gun fighting, but, if there is, I shall make it my business to see that it is clearly understood how it started. And I shall see this man punished if I have to appeal personally to every man in this country. I am quite sure they cannot all be like this one."

"They ain't, Miss. Reed, you got some folks buffalo'd round here, but I ain't one of 'em. You've been runnin' on a long rope an' some day it's goin to trip you up. I wouldn't wonder but what it got around yore neck. If this young lady don't git to Palos Verdes, with thet young feller thet's drivin' her, you're goin' to find thet same rope gittin' taut. You're sore at Runt, because he tackled you last night an' as fer the young lady, you don't know one when you see her or how to treat one. Sam Trediger 'll be goin' to have somethin' to say to you an' there's quite a few besides me who are gittin' plumb fed up on the Double R's figgerin' it kin run Vacada any way it happens to feel like. I've spoke my piece an' I ain't jest voicin' it fer myself, Tom Reed. You drive on with the lady, Runt. I loaned you my gun because you're a friend of Trediger. He wouldn't have hired you if he didn't cotton to you. Yore on'y trouble is you got more nerve than experience out in this country. But I figger you won't have to use it none. You heard me, Reed!"

REED'S face was dark with suffused blood. His hand had dropped to his gun butt, but stayed there. The storekeeper outfaced him. That the highhanded methods of his outfit might have wearied the better type of citizens to the point of keen resentment had occurred to Reed and he had peered at it. It seemed it had gone farther. The owner of the store was an important person in the country. He carried credits for the whole community, he was well liked. In his striped shirt, turned up above arms furred with red hair, a strap for belt dividing his too large stomach into two bulges; with his florid face and sandy mustache, he was not an heroic figure beside Reed on his fine horse with the saddle and bridle silver trimmed, his raiment almost theatrical. But the storekeeper's eyes were steady. He was not afraid of Reed. The Runt was not afraid of him. Neither was the girl.

Their fearlessness beat upon him, lashed his beastly temper. But he was cold sober. Though his hand itched for gunplay, though his nature lusted for the vivid beauty of the girl whose presence had frustrated his plans he held himself in, for the present. The agent had almost threatened him. The storekeeper's talk was, he knew, representative. Trediger—he was afraid of Trediger. He was not essentially a coward. He was ready enough to fight on occasion, but instinct told him that Trediger was the better man of the two. And Baldy Burton had been noted as a shot for more years than Reed had been born. The repression of his evil desires made the veins in his temples stand out.

"You ought to take up preachin', Baker," he said to the storekeeper. "You sure kin run off at the mouth. Runt, some day I'm goin' to take you all apart, unless this li'l lady begs you off. I might do what she asked me, if she was nice about it. I'll see you agen, Miss. I'll be callin' on you before long."

With a sweep of his sombrero he at once

mockingly saluted her and struck his horse's neck. It bounded forward after rearing and he swept down the street in a cloud of dust, a superb horseman, the silver conchas on his chaps, the silver lacing of his big sombrero and the points of his equipment twinkling in the sun.

"I'll keep the gun, jest the same, if you ain't needin' it," said Joe. "I'll see it comes back soon as possible.'

"You're welcome. Thet Reed is gittin' to be a public nuisance, him an' his riders. I don't think he'll bother you this trip."

Joe drove off. Reed had left his horse outside the Prickly Pear.

"Thet's the feller thet's tryin' to git hold of yore ranch," said Joe. "Wants it account of the water. Trediger'll tell you all about it, if the lawyer chap didn't already."

"Mr. Smithers? He wrote something about my taking possession as soon as possible, to ease the title. But I thought it was just legal talk. Can you shoot, Joe Cross?"

SHE turned her vivid face toward him and Joe felt himself getting scarlet. She had called him Joe Cross, as if she had known him for a long time. Almost as if she liked him, considered him an equal.

"I never fired one of these," he said. "I kin shoot some with a shotgun, an' a rifle. But I reckon I could mebbe have hit him if he'd started somethin'."

"You're brave, aren't you, Joe?

"Me brave? There was things crawlin' up an' down my spine all the time. They ain't stopped yit. I was skeered a'most to death."

"I didn't notice it. Your hands were steady enough."

"I wish Trediger had been here. He'd have made thet Reed look like a lead nickel."

"Is he a good shot—and brave?"

"Trediger? I reckon he's jest about perfect. You'll think so when you see him. You're sure lucky to have him holdin' down yore ranch."

"Tell me about it."

He told her what he knew, of his own hiring, of Trediger's cool courage and Baldy's marksmanship. She listened with an interest that made him almost eloquent, especially when he spoke of Trediger. When he finished the girl sat thoughtful and silent. Joe glanced back. He did not raise his voice when he asked her.

"You think you kin drive these hosses?"

"I'd love to try. I think I could. I want to drive and ride. You see——" The look on Joe's face stilled her to a whisper. "What is it?"

"They're comin' after us, the three of 'em. Looks like they meant business. You take the lines an' I'll——It's all right," he broke off. "I should've waited. They was comin', all right, but they've swung off the road. I reckon the Double R lies over thet way. Sorry I made a break like thet. But I reckon you don't scare easy. You sure told Reed where he headed in."

"I like to be stirred up, Joe. I've been living a frightfully dull life. You see I'm a typist—I was a typist—and it isn't exciting. I had a job cataloging the books in a private library that I had promised to finish, and every day, I used to think, was longer than the rest until I could get away. It was wonderful, my uncle leaving me this ranch. I hardly knew him. I've always been poor, Joe, and had to work for my living. And I've always dreamed of owning a place, some day, dreamed of riding, of mountains, and wide plains, and now it's come true. Mr. Smithers says it will take time and money to bring the ranch back, and there isn't much money. I had some old debts to pay from when my mother was ill for so long before she died; so there's not much left, but I'm going to try and do it, if a girl tenderfoot can."

She had called him Joe. She had been poor. Had nursed her mother and gone in

debt for her. Just as he had. But there was a wide gap between them, he in his jeans with his rough speech and ways and she in her trim dress, her soft speech.

"We thought you was a man," he said. "Baldy 'lowed he didn't keer fer a man named Cecil."

She laughed like a peal of bells.

"Mr. Smithers made the same mistake," she said. "I suppose Cecil *is* a man's name, and Cecily the feminine of it. But Cecily doesn't seem to fit a girl with bobbed hair. And there are plenty of girls called Cecil. You'll all have to get used to calling me that. It sounds fine, Joe, you and Baldy and this wonderful Trediger of yours. I'm aching to see him and the ranch. I hope I can afford to keep you all.

"You see I always sign myself just Cecil Whiting and perhaps my writing looks like a man's. I'm a good deal of a tomboy, Joe. And uncle's will didn't mention I was his niece. It was very short and he just put in the name. I was so excited I forgot to correct Mr. Smithers in my first letter to him though I laughed at his Cecil Whiting Esquire. Afterward I signed Miss, but perhaps he forgot to mention it to you."

Joe had a thought that Smithers might have kept quiet thinking that Trediger and Baldy might have balked about working for a girl, but it would not be polite to say so. They'd work for her, he was sure of that. She said she liked the West, as he did, now he was here in the real environment. She wanted to ride and drive and bring back the ranch. She wanted to keep all of them. She wanted to see Trediger. Suppose those two fell in love with each other? That would be fine.

"We got a letter forwarded from Smithers," he said. "It's in my pocket, got here this morning. Then I got your telegram. I didn't know you were comin' when I drove to town. They'll be thinkin' somethin's happened to me. Here's the letter."

He handed it to her.

"It feels as if mine was inside," she said. "The one I asked him to read and forward to Mr. Trediger. I said I would wire direct. But the letter must have been delayed somehow. We'll see. Is it far to the ranch?"

"It ain't fur, Miss.

"Cecil, Joe. Please?"

HE HAD hard work to get it out. It was almost like being impertinent. But there was no doubt of her friendliness. She didn't look down on him because they called him Runt. She ignored that. He was glad he was a little taller than she was. As a matter of fact, though he was well built and he had at least fed well at the Prickly Pear. He looked sturdy enough. And since he had asserted himself he had unconsciously acquired a bearing that suggested a self confidence that impressed Cecil. And while his speech might be crude, nevertheless, to her it was picturesque. She did not rate him as a tenderfoot. She knew that he had courage. She liked his mouth and his chin. The years of stress that he had sustained had given him character.

They were entering the foothills. All was new and strange and fascinating to her, as it had been to Joe. The creek that made Palos Verdes so valuable a holding was running clear beside the road and she wondered if there were trout in it. "I've always wanted to catch a trout," she said. "But I've never been far out of the city since I was a little girl. Were you born here, Joe?"

"Born here? No, Miss—Cecil. Wish I had been. I come here from Arkansaw. I didn't have money enough to buy a gun. I had to beat my way on freight trains. They threw me off east of here an' thet's how I come to Vacada."

"It must have been exciting, making your way like that, Joe."

"It was, in spots." She didn't despise him for having been a hobo. She was wonderful. He grinned a little as he thought of the surprise in store for Trediger and Baldy.

A rider came round the bend at a fast clip, the horse a big roan, the man seeming a part of him, lithe and upright in the saddle. It was Trediger.

"Thet's him!" cried Joe. "Thet's Sam Trediger! Comin' to look fer me. Thinks I've got into trouble."

Trediger pulled the roan down to a walk, then to a halt, and waited for them.

His sharply cut face showed no emotion and his manner was gravely polite as he took off his Stetson. Joe was disappointed, but it was like Trediger.

"This is Miss Cecil Whiting," he explained. "The agent said there was a telegram and he read it to me, so I waited. There's a letter too she thinks was delayed."

The girl was looking at Trediger with slightly widened eyes. Here was the real thing. He had batwing leather chaps, and tapaderos on the stirrups, for he had been riding rough country that morning. His dark blue shirt with the red bandana about his neck was picturesque. His face was that of a strong man, not handsome except to those who judged apart from artistic ideals; a firm face, aggressive, the face of one who commands himself, eyes like blued steel that now took on a milder aspect. His broad shoulders and deep chest, his narrow loins, could not be entirely hidden by garments. There was frank admirafion in Cecil's gaze.

"I'm mighty glad to see you, Miss Whiting," he said. "You sure surprised me."

"You didn't show it," she laughed. "But that was Mr. Smithers' fault. You might open that letter. It's stale news now, but somethinug must have held it up."

Trediger opened the envelope, sitting easy on the restive roan. He took out a sheet signed by Smithers, glanced at it and then looked at the letter enclosed.

"It's stamped 'missent'," he said. "Went to Los Altos, California, fer some reason. Thet's the worst of these Spanish names. They're allus the same in every state."

"I love them," she said. "Palos Verdes. Mr. Smithers wrote me that meant Green Trees."

Trediger gave her a keen look, approving, interested. But his face did not lose its gravity.

"There's no woman at the ranch," he said. "I could mebbe git one."

"What for? There are three of you to look after me. I thought I had left all those conventions behind. Do you *have* to be chaperoned out West? I want to run my own place in my own way. I don't mean your end of it, though I want to learn that. I've never done it, of course, but I mean to try. I'm going to call you Sam and Baldy and Joe. May I?"

"I reckon so. I reckon you don't have to hire a woman if you don't wish fer it. I didn't *sabe* you wanted to take hold yorese'f."

His glance rested for a moment on her traveling suit, the shapely legs in the silk stockings. Her intuition told her what he thought.

"You wait till I get into my working clothes," she said. "I'm going to run Joe out of the kitchen, first thing. A man doesn't belong there no matter how well he cooks."

"Most cooks are men out here, Miss. Wimmen are sort of sca'ce." His voice indicated that her kind were especially so. "But they're mos'ly Chinks an' Mexicans. We kin sure use Joe outside."

JOE was grateful to him for that. What a fine chap he was. And the girl thought so too. It was great. Then he sensed the underlying gravity of Trediger. He remembered Reed's attitude. He would have to tell Trediger and Baldy of that. Not in front of her. She would be a greater responsibility than any dude. And she wanted to run the ranch. She should. She was friendly to all of them. Trediger would handle it.

"I reckon Joe'll have to git dinner, Miss," said the puncher. "While you look around. I caught up a hawss fer you, Joe. You ride, Miss?"

"My name is Cecil, please?" She looked up into Trediger's face half saucily, irresistibly. Joe felt a fleeting pang, a wish that she would look at him like that.

"Miss Cecil," said Trediger.

"Without the Miss."

"Cecil."

They had come in sight of the ranchhouse, its white walls and deep windows, the red Spanish tiles, the outbuildings and the corrals in their setting of rugged walls and verdant valley, of waving trees and

sparkling water, the range beyond.

"It's wonderful!" exclaimed Cecil.

"It's a right nice place," agreed Trediger. He rode close to the buckboard, pointing out things and naming them in answer to her eager questions. Then Baldy appeared, sombrero covering his head, standing in amazement, his mouth open. His hat came off and his bare dome shone in the sun. He gulped when he was introduced. stuttered a greeting.

"He ain't allus thataway, Cecil," said Trediger gravely, showing none of the confusion over the name that Joe felt whenever he even thought of using it. "He's right human at times. Sort of woman shy. He got married one time an' it didn't take. You'll have to handle him gentle at first."

Baldy glared, indignant, struggling for free speech.

"I'm glad to meet you," said the girl. "You don't mind if I call you Baldy, do you? Just to be friends?"

"You could call me most anything you've a mind to, marm, an' welcome." He held her outstretched hand as if it had been a piece of fragile porcelain, dropped it as if it had burned him.

"The crick's goin' down fast, Sam," he said. "I dunno what in Sam Hill has——"

"See you about thet soon's we take Cecil to the house," said Trediger, cutting in sharply. "Joe, you show her round. You'll excuse me," he added to the girl. "I want to 'tend to somethin'."

Baldy and Sam walked away to the creek, the roan, its reins on the saddle horn, following them.

"What's this about the crick? I didn't notice it comin' in."

"Don't blame you with thet humwhizzer in the buckboard. She's a—a—reg'lar flower of a gal," he finally exploded.

"Gittin' sort of poetical in yore bold age, ain't you? Remind you of yore wife?"

"Jest the same way a butterfly reminds me of a hornlizard. Look thar at the crick, Sam. She's gone down three inches on them rocks sence I see it last."

Trediger surveyed the creek somberly, looked up toward the canyon.

"It was jest after you started out to see what had happened to Joe," went on Baldy. "I was fixin' up a latigo fer his saddle when I heard a sort of a boom. Way off in the range it seemed. I figgered it was thunder. When I got through I see the crick was low at the drinkin' pool. Think it's a landslide. Could easy be blocked way up the canyon above the bend where the cliffs close in. There's a lot of dirt one side come down some time. Might have done it agen."

"It might," said Trediger. "We'll take a look at it. It might've been natural, an' it might not. We'll let it go till after dinner. Can't stop it."

"What air you drivin' at? Think Reed's been up to deviltry?"

"Up canyon, where you mentioned, thet's off our land. It could be easy blocked, like you say, by a landslide—or by a charge of dynamite in the right place. Landslides don't boom exactly."

"It was a boom all right. If they've shet off the water, it's next thing to runnin' off the cows."

"Enough fer them to rustle fer a day or so. Smart trick, if they've turned it. I'll have to tell her the situation. I dunno should she stop here, on'y it establishes title."

Joe came out from the house.

"She's crazy over the place," he said. "Changin' her clothes now. I've got somethin' I wanted to tell you 'fore I started dinner. About Reed."

Trediger and Baldy exchanged glances as Joe spoke, and their faces hardened as he went on.

"Good fer Baker, an' good fer you Joe, and likewise thet agent chap." said Trediger. "Baker's right. Reed an' his outfit are gettin' too rambunctious. He means mischief, I wish I'd been there—not but what you did fine, Joe."

"He w'uldn't hev' looked at her like he did if you'd been erlong," said Joe. "But you shud hev' seen the way *she* spoke up."

"I reckon she'll stick," said Trediger.

"We'll have to look out fer her. Crick's been blocked, Joe. I figger Reed might've had a hand in it. Best not mention it, if she don't. It may be jest a land slip."

"She'll mention it," said Joe. "Spoke about it agen to me."

"Well," Trediger answered, "we'll ride up the canyon a bit later. Two of us. One kin stay in the house with her."

THAT would be he, Joe reflected as he busied himself with the meal. It was natural and he was pleased at being told off as qualified to protect her. He had already done so to the best of his ability. The blocking of the creek, if it had been done purposely, was a shrewd stroke. If it was effective it might depreciate the value of the ranch considerably. The girl might be induced to sell. But that theory did not tally with the look in Reed's face. Still, that might have been a momentary expression of something he thought better of, especially since he heard Baker's opinion of him.

He mulled it over until dinner was ready. The girl was dressed in riding clothes, her slender figure charming in the boyish attire.

"If you've got a horse and saddle for me, I'd like to ride over the place this afternoon," she said.

"I'd ruther you didn't," said Trediger gravely. "Baldy an' me have got to be away. I'd rather you stayed in while we're gone."

She looked at him curiously.

"Where are you going?" she asked. It was a question she had a right to put.

"Baldy thinks there's been a landslide up the canyon. The crick's runnin' low. We'll have to see what kin be done about it."

Cecil Whiting sat thoughtful for a moment. "The ranch wouldn't be worth much without water?" she asked.

Trediger shook his head.

"I'll go with you."

"It'd be better not."

"Why?"

Trediger studied her in turn.

"There's a chance Reed might've done it. Looks like it was off your land. If it's where Baldy guesses, the creek wouldn't overflow the slide. It'd back up an' be diverted down a side canyon an' flow on to Reed's land. He's short of water."

"Oh!" The girl gasped and Joe saw daylight.

"He may have some men posted there to keep us off, mebbe until he's sure his dam'll hold. Or to prevent us blowin' it up agen. Thet might not be so easy. A blast would be jest as likely to bring down more dirt an' rock. The cliff on one side is seamed an' splits easy, an', on the other there's dirt thet has slid down before."

"But it's surely against the law to divert the natural flow of water?"

"It might be. We don't own thet crick to the source. I reckon we'd have a good case, but Reed ain't botherin' much about the law. It's a tricky thing out here. More law then jestice, sometimes."

"You think it might be dangerous to go up there?"

"Baldy an' me are totin' our guns, likewise rifles."

"I'm going with you."

Baldy looked helplessly at Trediger who spoke softly.

"It's yore ranch. I don't know as I kin prevent you. I'm usin' my jedgment to try an' stop you."

"They wouldn't shoot a girl?"

"I reckon not. But there's worse things than shootin'. Joe was tellin' me Reed warn't exactly perlite when he met you."

Her face grew scarlet for a moment.

"I'm going," she said, her curving mouth obstinate. "Please get me a horse and saddle. I can take the one you caught for Joe."

"It's a tough trail," said Trediger. She tossed her head. It was plain that she had a high spirit. The two punchers went out. Nothing was said about Joe. He cleared the table and she helped him. Joe was silent.

"I suppose you think I shouldn't be al-

lowed to do as I want on my own place," she said. "That your wonderful Trediger is right."

"Yes, I do. I reckon you'd better not go."

He went back into the main room, locked the front door and slid the key into his pocket. He locked the door between the main room and the eastern ell that held the bedrooms and pocketed that key also. Then he came back into the kitchen where she was staring out of the window to the patio, tapping her foot in its trim riding boot, her color high.

She turned as he came in and went into the main room. Joe locked the door from the kitchen, which occupied all the western ell with its pantry. He had just put away the key of that when she came back with her eyes snapping angry lights.

"Did you lock those doors?" she demanded.

"Yes m'm. I locked up the house."

"Open it."

Joe felt his newfound world slipping under his feet, but he had made up his mind.

"You didn't see Reed all the time he was lookin' at you," he said. "I did. Trediger planned fer me to stay here in the house with you. They may shoot at them. They kin take care of themselves. You ain't used to such things. You'd only hinder 'em. They might cut you off. It may be, thet sort of a trick as well as jest gittin' water to Reed's land. I've been thinkin' it out."

"You have? I believe you are in my pay. So is Mr. Trediger. He did what I asked him to do. Do you intend to deliberately disobey me, to keep me here?"

It was hard work to face her, to incur her displeasure, but he stuck to it.

"Yes m'm, thet was what I meant to do. You kin fire me, of course. I ain't much account, long side of Trediger. He figgers to protect you, too. If you fired him you'd lose yore best man, an' I reckon he knew thet. But you're sure makin' it hard fer him. If you fire me, it's all right. You git the keys an' it's up to Trediger but—you ain't actin' reasonable," he finished defiantly.

HER eyes fairly blazed. For a moment he thought she was going to strike him. Suddenly all the mutiny went out of her face as if a shadow had passed and left her in the sun.

"I suppose you're right, Joe. It would be a silly risk to take, and I would only be in their way. I don't even know how to ride. So I'll stay here and you'll look after me, won't you?"

He did not answer her. He unlocked the doors, unconscious of having scored a victory that made her regard him with a new respect. He took long breaths. It had been a narrow squeak.

"She ain't goin' with you. She's changed her mind," he told Trediger and saw the relief come into his face.

"It's a way they have," said Baldy. "But it ain't so often they do it to suit us."

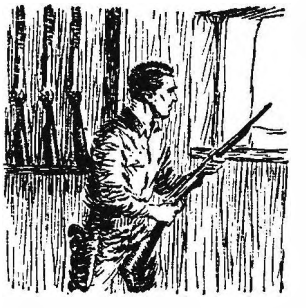
"We'll be back soon's we kin, Joe," said Trediger. "Before supper, anyway. I'll get the rifles an' shells, Baldy."

They rode off with two six-guns apiece and with high-powered thirty-thirtys in saddle-sheaths. Joe watched them leave with a suddenly increased sense of responsibility. He remembered Reed's last words to the girl——

"I'll be callin' on you before long."

Suppose this *was* just a ruse to call Trediger and Baldy away? Suppose they were watching to see if it worked. He knew that Reed thought little of his prowess. He was just the Runt. A tenderfoot.

Cecil had gone to her room. Joe went to an arms rack and took down a Winchester. It was a far better weapon than the one his stepfather had owned and it was in beautiful condition from stock-butt to muzzle-end, oiled to a feather's tickle, the magazine full. He slid the mechanism and left a shell in the breech. He had the pistol that Baker had loaned him. There were two others and he knew where the ammunition was. It might be foolish loading up but he felt that he was doing the right thing. His



hunch came from within, but the atmosphere seemed somehow charged with impending menace.

It was very quiet in the house. The windows and the thick adobe walls shut out all sound from without. Bees hummed in the patio amid the fragrant flowers as he brought in some dry cloths for his dishes. The girl came presently and helped him, all trace of resentment gone, though she did not have much to say.

When they were through he stayed in the kitchen, but she called him into the big room. She held a small nickel-plated gun in her hand.

"Will you show me how to load this, Joe?" she asked. "I see you've been getting ready for trouble. I suppose we might as well be prepared. I don't put anything past that Reed."

Joe showed her how to break the cylinder and put in the cartridges. She certainly was plucky.

"It's my ranch, you see," she said. "The only thing I've got and I intend to keep it. It seemed silly at first to think that men were really intending of running off the rightful owners, even after I'd seen Reed —but not so much after I'd heard that storekeeper and watched you. Sam Trediger convinced me. He doesn't say much but I'd imagine he was quick enough in action. And then I saw something else, just now. How did all those bullets come in the front door like that, Joe? You'll tell me?"

Her eyes were sparkling as Joe told her about the bullets. He looked round the room, wondering how best to defend the place, how anyone would attack it. The bars of the window grilles were of hardwood, but they would have been better of iron. All the doors had sockets with heavy bars to drop into them, standing ready. Now that she had talked about the possibilities of danger he did not hesitate to put them in place.

"Nothing will probably happen," she said. "There's no use worrying about it before hand. Tell me about that Arkansas farm of yours, Joe."

He had left little unsaid after an hour, the girl drawing him out. There was sympathy in her face when he ended.

"You've had a hard time, Joe," she said. "I hope it's all over. I think you did just what was right. You see, my father died too, and my mother——"

He learned her history. It seemed to link them closer, to make them just "folks." She'd be a wonderful woman for some man, like Trediger, to handle her ranch for her. And, what a sweetheart! The line of thought did not please him altogether.

Trediger and Baldy had been gone over two hours. They would be back soon.

There were inner shutters to the casements that could be closed in emergency, he discovered. They had been hidden by the hangings. It would darken the rooms, but that would help them rather than hinder, with any targets outside in full light.

"I'll hev' to be startin' supper," he said.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. You can help, if you want to, as long as you have to be in the house but, from now on, I'm the cook."

The larder was a cool place on the north side. They went into it together and Joe showed her the trout Trediger had brought in with two brace of willow grouse and a haunch of venison on a hook.

"We'll have the birds, I think—broil them," decided Cecil. "Come on, Joe, you make some more of those biscuits."

IT WAS chummy to work together. She was better at it than he but he was an able assistant.

"I'll lay the cloth and then we'll be all ready," she said.

She didn't seem to do much, Joe thought, aside from the table setting, which was different from that of Trediger, but a few deft touches had made the place homey. She herself was the main cause of the difference, he fancied.

"Why don't you smoke, Joe?" she asked. "I don't, so far. But you must. Please do. It's going to be great, Joe, running the ranch. For you as well as me, because it's all going to be new to us."

"We got a good man to show us," he said.

"Baldy?"

"I reckon he's all right, but I meant Trediger."

She laughed at his injured look.

"I was only teasing you, Joe. You think he's perfect, don't you?"

"So will you when you git to know him."

"I wonder. Joe, I think it's all a false alarm. They're back. I saw two men just ride past that window. One of them on a roan. That must be Sam though they went too fast for me to recognize their faces."

"On a roan?"

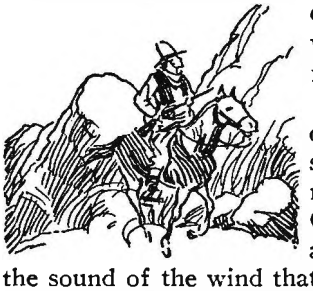
"Yes. Isn't that the color of Sam's horse?"

"Of one of 'em. The one he calls his topstring hoss. But he ain't ridin' him this afternoon. Rode him all mornin'. He's on a black hoss this afternoon an' Baldy's on one of them spotted ones they call pintos."

They looked at each other with widening eyes.

IT WAS not an easy trail up the canyon after the first quarter of a mile. The cliffs closed in and sometimes Trediger and Baldy had to ride up the bed of the dwindled creek that now lay almost entirely in pools where the startled trout had collected. Here and there the gorge widened and there were trees, shrubs and some grass, in other places nothing but sand and boulders, with stranded trunks of larger trees carried down by storm waters from the heights, whitened skeletons stripped of bark.

They had debated whether to ride along the rimrock of the walls but decided upon the advantage of looking at the fill from a comparative level, where inspection as to the chances of opening up the obstruction would be more satisfactory. If there was going to be trouble the risk was about even. And they were prepared for trouble.



It was very quiet in the absence of the rushing water. Occasionally there was the sound of the wind that drew down the canyon, ruffling the foliage, and that was all. At any moment a shot might ring out. But it was paramount to find out all they could about the water supply. The pool in the patio would serve their own needs but, within a few days, the cattle would be suffering, would need herding to the various springs. And the feeling that Reed was gloating over the diversion of the creek to his own dry range was one that rankled.

At last they had to leave their horses in a small lateral box canyon where they would have shade. They were off the home ranch now. The side canyon had an entrance of less than thirty feet and this had been turned into an enclosure by poles that were old and down but still serviceable. It might have been used for legitimate purposes but it had all the signs of a rustlers' corral though it had clearly not been used lately.

They took their rifles, carrying them in the hollow of their left arms, both crossbelted with two holstered six-guns, their faces grave, their eyes scanning the creek bed, the cliffs, listening for the betraying fall of a rock fragment that would indicate watchers, or posted scouts who might be snipers. Neither of them moved a stride without regard for cover behind which they might drop without delay.

They came to the bend that Baldy had mentioned. The floor rose abruptly for some twenty feet where there had been a fall. Now the pool below it was still full, though its surface no longer eddied, but the face of the cascade rock showed only a meager trickle, with no signs of increase.

They were comparatively safe right here. There had been a pool above the fall which now was deepened many feet by the barrier of rock and soil which had fallen upon the stony lip where the original flow of water had passed. Behind that the narrowed canyon was now filled with the restrained creek, its surface raised so that it found outlet through a cleft that led to another uneven gorge, impractical of any trail but which formed an aqueduct to eventually carry the water to Reed's holding. No one, unless they were in some craft or on a log—which was unlikely—could fire at them from the pool, and the cliffs on either side were so sheer and so beetling of rim that rifle fire upon the canyon floor beneath the wall of the old cascade was impractical.

No danger might threaten, but it seemed

to lurk in the warm, soft silence of the shadowy ravine. Trediger figured that the return trip would be the more hazardous.

They examined the dam. The rock of the cliffs was deeply seamed by the tremendous torrents that must have rushed there in earlier days. There were caves and buttresses almost outstanding columns. Fresh fractures of the rock showed plainly on one side; on the other these were less marked because of the talus that had already faced the cliff from an old landslide which this had not been. Dynamite had flung down debris into the gap. Dynamite might remove it or it might only serve to create more havoc of downsliding rock and soil and boulders.

MORE than once Trediger had casually surveyed the spot as a suitable one for a reservoir, if irrigation had been contemplated and the site had been on Palos Verdes land. It was too negligible to attract government enterprise even if Palos Verdes had not included the mouth of the canyon. Now his random idea had been carried out, to the benefit of Reed who would naturally deny the fact if it ever came to the courts. The thing to do was to try and pierce the dam and restore the flow. There were no explosives at the ranch. They could get them at Vacada, but he had a hunch that after he and Baldy got back it would be wiser for no one to leave the vicinity of the house for a while. He felt that this was but the first gun in Reed's campaign.

"She's holdin' back the water," observed Baldy, looking at the debris, "but she ain't settled too firm, mebbe. We ain't had rain fer a long time. If a cloudburst happened along an' struck the canyon head, like it has afore, it's pretty fair bettin' it'd wash it all out."

Trediger nodded.

"Might, if luck come our way. Might as well be gittin' back."

They got half way back to the horses without incident. Then a rifle coughed from the cliff top, its echoes ringing as the walls flung them back and forth. A splash of lead appeared on a boulder that Trediger was passing. The second shot followed and the bullet fanned Baldy's cheek.

Baldy dropped and scrambled for cover like a shambling bear while Trediger leaped to where a stranded tree trunk lay over water-rounded rocks. The canyon was

wider here but the floor was sown with natural entrenchments. The two found themselves fairly close to each other though they could only see part of one another as they crouched, gauging the trajectory, their own weapons ready to speak back, looking for some telltale, wispy haze of smoke to give away the sharpshooters. They were trapped, cut off from the house if they were not to be sooner or later wounded or killed by direct aim or glancing lead.

"Mott and Landers," Baldy called over. There was no sense in lowering their voices now. "How you fixed, Sam? Be keerful. Thet Mott is a wizard."

"I'm all right, old-timer. Look out fer yorese'f an' line yore sights pretty."

"If I git anything to line 'em on," grumbled Baldy.

The next shots came from different angles. Again and again the silent canyon rang with echoes as the snipers sought them out while they crouched furious but unable to reply. Neither believed in wasting cartridges and they had no targets. The rocks were scored with splashing lead. It whipped into the sand and shingle, richocheted, venomously seeking them out, death in its bite.

They made the most of their advantages, shifting now and then, piling up smaller boulders at the risk of being hit, gradually establishing themselves.

The canyon ran there roughly north and south. It was always largely in shadow at that spot, and it would get dark early. With darkness they could get through unless Reed set men across the canyon itself, and found their horses. Even then they had a good chance in the blackness, firing at flashes, both crack shots with the pistol,

Baldy a little short of a marvel. What chafed was the fact that they had gone more or less knowingly into a trap that had been cunningly baited with their necessity to examine the cause of the water failure.

An hour passed without two minutes when a bullet or two did not come searching for them.

"I got to move," growled Baldy. "I'm cramped worse 'n the rheumatiz. One leg's asleep an' my left side's dozin'."

"Listen," called Trediger. "I heard shots down canyon."

Between the reports from the snipers on the cliffs they clearly distinguished an intermittent popping, like the beating of rugs in a distant yard.

"Fur off," said Baldy. "They ain't shootin' at us."

It was not necessary to say anything more. The firing was at the house.

"We got to git there, Baldy," said Sam. "The Kid can't hold 'em off. An' there's the gal."

"Plumb hell, an' I reckon we got to wade it!"

Mott, lying belly down on the top of the cliff, watching his chance, saw a head move cautiously about a boulder, crowned by a Stetson. It was withdrawn swiftly, before he could sight, to reappear on the far side of the rock. He squeezed trigger and grinned as he saw Trediger's tall body jerk into plain sight, twist about and fall, writhing and rolling, out of sight again. He did not bother much about that. He knew how a man acted when he was mortally hurt. He had got him through the head. He might live for a while but he and Landers would go down and make a finish of him when they got the other, before they reported back to Reed, who was after the house—with the girl thrown in.

MOTT was a killer. Landers a lesser one. They killed cold sober. Reed and the rest were fairly well drunk after the success of stopping the creek, keyed up to their deviltry; but Mott did not need it, shot better without liquor. And Landers followed his example.

Landers saw a bunch of blue shirt. Baldy, crawling out of cover. Trying to. It was his turn to match up with Mott. His rifle spat viciously and the blue hump, one of Baldy's shoulders it must be, slumped out of his view. But he saw two legs, from the knees down, that drummed the ground with spurred bootheels, convulsively, before they were drawn up spasmodically and seemed to stiffen in that position. Just one foot showed from behind a boulder. Landers, grinning as Mott had done, his actual killing minor triumph compared to the fact that Mott had not wiped his eye, shot at the foot, not certain that his man was dead but feeling fairly sure of it. The bullet went to the mark, the foot jerked and fell again, limp, inanimate.

Landers, emulating Mott, withdrew from the cliff's edge on hands and knees before he stood up. The tally of notches both might have carved on their gunbutts but had not, not seeking that sort of advertisement, had been largely helped because of this habit of caution.

Landers waved a signal across to Mott and the latter, interpreting it, gestured down canyon. There were places there, on both sides, where they could descend to the creek, or where the creek had been. Their orders were to finish both the men. It was a business matter with them. They got a bonus from Reed for deeds like this, and they were not actuated by any of the desires that motivated him.

They had been hired as "gunmen" by various people, sometimes for protection against rustlers, sometimes for elimination purposes in feuds. Their last "job" had been unfortunate. They had shot down two men, father and son, who were general favorites. It was true that there had been the usual evidence of their being last on the actual draw, but the older victim had been taunted into it, the younger shot as he came to the impetuous defence of his father. And, although the law of the range was prone to assume that, gun to gun, all men were supposed to be able to take care of themselves or not "tote" a weapon, this last shooting had been flagrant, added to other similar "happenings," and Mott and Landers unpopular in their recent haunts, "drifted." They had learned

through various "grapevine" sources of Reed's activities. Actually they hired themselves for murder.

They met on the canyon floor, some way above the side corral where the horses of the men they sought were still corraled. This was not known to the pair of killers. They assumed that Trediger and Baldy had come at least part of the way in the saddle, but they had been posted above the bend of the gorge since a little after daylight, waiting for the investigation Reed knew was sure to be made and had only witnessed their arrival on foot.

"Still at it down by the house," said Landers, jerking his head in the direction where the popping noises came intermittently.

"Thet's Reed's end of it," said Mott. "Git yore man?"

"Rangin' shot, down through the shoulder. Saw the dust fly. He's meat."

"Got mine through the head," said Mott. "Made him spin like a top. We'll go back an' git their guns. Turn 'em in."

The weapons of their victims were as so many scalps. Possession of the pistols of Trediger and Baldy Burton was *prima facie* evidence that they were dead.

"Reed's a plumb fool, monkeyin' with thet gal," said Landers. "Likely to be a stink raised over it. No sense in foolin' with a woman."

Mott shrugged his shoulders. They were not regular members of the Double R outfit, but guerillas. They could collect at any time and quit. The shrug meant not only that Mott considered the question of the girl Reed's own business but that he was not going to be mixed up in it if he considered it wiser to get out.

"He'll git rid of her when he's through," he said. "Ship her, likely."

"He'll have to git rid of the hull outfit."

Mott shrugged again.

"Only thet tenderfoot now. Come on."

They went up canyon, rifles at trail in their left hands, a six-gun in the rights. Both were positive that their men were either dead or dying, disabled; but they took no chances. They were experts at judging the involuntary and convulsive movements of men mortally hit, but both knew that life lingered long and that occasionally almost miraculous recoveries were made by those of Trediger's and Baldy's type, men of vigorous vitality and strong will to live. And they knew that Baldy, at least, had recognized Mott and knew his reputation. They would make sure of their men, give them the final *coup de grace*—if bloody and deliberate murder could be so phrased, hide their bodies in some cleft of the canyon.

There was no emotion on their faces, none in their eyes, the pale blue orbs of their type. No excitement. But they went carefully, knowing just where to find their quarry.

JOE'S first act was to lock and bar the kitchen door. He thought of barring the gates to the patio, but he would have to expose himself to do so. The two men the girl had sighted—there might well be more, coming other ways—could have already taken up position. If they killed him, the girl would be without a defender.

He believed that Trediger and Baldy would get back, even if they had been cut off, for now all his suspicions seemed confirmed. Reed had worked out his moves cleverly, but Trediger would best him. He was sure of that. He had to be sure of it. He could close the house and they might stand an indefinite siege until the doors were battered down but, sooner or later, they would get in. There was water inside, enough to last until then.

The girl met him. Her eyes shining. There seemed no fear in her, though she must realize her peril—far greater than that of Joe.

"I've barred the front door," she said, "but I can't handle those heavy shutters alone. It's the only thing we can do."

"First thing, anyway," said Joe. His brain was working swiftly. "There's a sort of attic under the roof," he told her as they worked at the shutters, using them as shields in case of flying bullets. "It's

got open places thet show in the walls outside, for ventilation, I reckon. Mebbe I kin git a shot or two at 'em from up there. Got to hold them off till Trediger shows up."

"You think he will?"

"I know it," said Joe simply.

There was a thud. A bullet had passed through a front window, as yet unshuttered, shattering the glass of the casement, the missile burying itself in the plaster of the further wall. This was a warning, a threat. Another followed, striking one of the tough wooden bars of the grille, splintering it a little.

Then they got the shutters together, made of sheet iron, painted, bullet proof, swung the fastenings into their slots. The room was now so dark they could barely see each other. A great hammering came at the front door. A voice shouted.

"We've got you where we want you." It was Reed calling, his voice hoarsely triumphant, more than a suggestion in it that he had been drinking. "We've finished off yore two hands, lady. They fell fer it like a pair of suckers. We'll treat you better, if you open up. If not, it ain't li'ble to be so pleasant."

"He's lyin'," said Joe. "Don't answer him. They can't git in fer a spell. I'm goin' to see how I kin git up in the attic. They can't set the place afire."

"I'll go with you," she said. "Don't leave me alone, Joe. I'm not panicky, but I'm frightened. They may have killed them both. And they've been drinking."

"Come on," he said.

"I think I know where we can get up," she told him. "There's some sort of a trap in the ceiling of my room, if we can reach it."

Reed seemed to have gone away. The silence was ominous. Joe caught up the rifles, filled his pockets with shells, took the pistols and, with the girl helping him with them and boxes of cartridges, they ran up to her room. There was a lamp there and he lit it. He took charge.

"Help me move the bed out, an' git thet bureau on top," he said. She aided him mutely with more strength than he had thought she could muster. On top of the bureau he found he could shift the trap door, thrust his head above the sill of it. There was a long triangular space over the ell, beneath the roof. Shafts of light came through it from the pierced walls where open tiling had been ornamentally arranged for ventilation and coolness.

SHE handed up the weapons and shells to him and then climbed on the shaky bureau while he steadied it. He boosted her up. She was in her riding things, boyish and active and she got through the opening. Joe followed. He doubted if he could shoot to advantage if the attackers once got under the cover of the walls. If they started to batter either floor down, he and the girl would have to go down and try and deter them. At the best their case was desperate. They were like rats in a trap that they themselves had closed.

Trediger and Baldy would have to save them. He clung to that avenue of escape against a feeling of dismay that was sapping at his courage.

They would hear the firing and they would come, he told himself, time and time again, over and over, to dispel the undermining thoughts.

They made their way over the big rafters easily enough, peered through the first opening, seeing nothing. The two ell attics ran into the one over the main room. There was one of the ornamental airways directly over the big door.

In front of the house, under a group of cottonwoods, five horses were standing, among them the roan that the girl had mistaken. Their riders were grouped there in consultation.

"Gimme one of those rifles," said Joe in a tense whisper. "I'll show 'em we kin shoot."

She handed it to him and he shoved the barrel into an opening, leaving the sights down. It was about fifty yards to the trees, he guessed. He meant to get Reed but the leader was the center of the consulting group. They had evidently arrived at some decision. Just as Joe pulled trigger, aiming at the nearest, since he could not cover Reed, the men scattered making for their horses, forcing his shot. It was not a clean miss, however. He got the man, apparently high up in

the arm, the impact of the shot sending him reeling before another steadied him.

Then all of them dived for cover, back of the trees. The horses plunged.

If he could only keep them there. There was no undergrowth. Better still, the trees were scattered and the ground back of them was bare. The horses were in front. He did not want to kill them but he meant to keep the five from their saddles, to make them remain back of the trees. He did not know if he could pick them off if they tried to make a bolt over the open ground, but his first shot had scored and he had established in them a certain fear of his marksmanship. He had got a deer on a running shot with his stepfather's gun. He felt a swift, sure confidence of his ability. If the girl and he were trapped they had the besiegers held back of the trees, if his shooting was good enough.

He flung a bullet at the side of the cottonwood behind which Reed had darted. The missile scored the bark. He saw it fly and. grinned to himself. The tables had turned a bit.

"If you can show me how to work a rifle I could fire through that opening on the right, through the left hand one too sometimes."

The girl had grasped the situation, peering over his shoulder through the opening. Joe figured it out. Poor shooting might offset good marksmanship, but, if she held the rifle steady against the tiled encasing of the opening, as he could show her, pulled trigger steadily, she could not send her bullets far astray. They had plenty of shells.

"Wait a minute," he said. He fired twice more, rapidly. Each time he barked a tree. He was holding them.

He swiftly explained the mechanism of the rifle to the girl, showing her how to put a fresh shell in the breech, how to work the loading gate. Her intelligence took it all in and she crept away to the right-hand ventilator, warned by him to keep away as much as possible from the chance of a bullet coming through, or wounding her with fragments. He saw it would be useless to try and dissuade her altogether and the risk seemed slight. He fancied that Reed and his men were puzzled as yet to know where the shots came from. They would find out before long, but he thought that he could keep their aim from being too accurate.

He saw the barrel of a rifle project from the spreading root of one of the trees. The root lifted above the ground, insufficiently for a man to find complete cover behind it, save where it joined the trunk and from that spot the angle of fire was none too good. His own shot struck the root. He might not be scoring bulls-eyes but he was getting within an inch or two of his marks and he began to feel exultant. The girl's weapon spoke, loud in the enclosed attic. He did not notice whether it hit a tree or where it struck. It sufficed to bother the attack. And, best of all, the horses scattered, frightened, running wild.

The besiegers began to fire in return. Joe could not cover all the trees at once, but he attended to them as fast as he could aim. He was cool and he felt a sense of satisfaction, almost of pleasure, as he barked the trunks or flung up dust at the bases. Once he saw flying fragments where the girl scored. They were holding them, forcing them to snapshots that starred the plaster of the adobe front wall but never came dangerously near the openings.

They could keep this up until Trediger and Baldy came, if they came before dark. That thought struck him suddenly. He tried to dismiss it, then faced it. When it got dark Reed would storm the place, batter down a door, rush them. Their only chance would be to get away themselves unobserved, perhaps from one of the windows. That would be giving up the house, playing into Reed's hands, but it would save the girl from falling into them.

The girl crossed behind him, to the left-hand ventilator.

"I'm shooting straight," she said. "I'm striking the trees almost every time. Close to the side sometimes."

"Fine!" It would all help to keep them there.

IT WAS hot under the roof, but they did not notice it. The reek of powder fouled the air for all the airspaces, the emptied and ejected shells began to make little piles. And the shadows lengthened, thrown eastward from the trees. It would be light yet for an hour and a half, perhaps more.

The girl crossed again, stopping to speak.

"When it's dark we'll have to get away," she said.

"I'm figgerin' thet out," Joe replied. He had decided that, if he could make her consent to it, and he would *have* to manage that, he would go first, from one side, drawing their fire if they discovered him, while she left from another exit. He hoped that they would concentrate on smashing in either the front or the rear door. Then they could venture to escape by the other. And yet it might be guarded.

To open the shutters and the windows meant that they would have to get rid of part at least of the wooden bars. They were both of slight build. They ought to be able to slide through with one bar removed on each window. There was a meat hacksaw in the kitchen that would do the work if the door held long enough to give them time. The odds were only four to one. The man he had hit was not doing any shooting, he reflected, would not take much active part in any assault, was not very happy or comfortable right now.

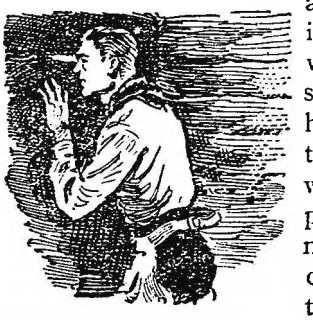
"Ah!"

A man had tried to dart between the trees. Joe fired and saw the man leap. He was not sure if he had hit him, but certain the man must have heard the bullet, if he had not actually felt it. It was close enough to keep them from trying that sort of thing again.

But dusk was beginning to gather. The house front was in almost the full glare of the western sun but soon the sun would drop behind a spur of the range and then there would be a too brief twilight. Meantime, the foliage of the trees helped to break up the rays so that they did not dazzle their aim too much.

He had matches. He determined to start a quick fusillade just before darkness fell and then they would creep downstairs and plan their flight. But surely Trediger would come. He and Baldy *must* have heard the firing.

It seemed to him that the dusk was already sifting in, that a veil was being spread between him and the trees. The light was getting poor. In a few minutes the men could leave the trees.



OVER Cabesos Canyon two buzzards were hovering. Other specks were winging towards the same spot. Two men lay among the boulders, stark, their blank eyes staring at the sky.

JOE called the girl over, explained his alternative plan to her. In either case, through door or window, he was to go first.

"I won't do anything of the kind," she said. "We'll go together or not at all." His arguments could not wring consent from her. "Something has happened to Trediger and Baldy," she said. "There are only the two of us left. I'd rather stay. I hate to give up the house."

"It's goin' to be hard work to stop a rush," said Joe. "An', if Reed gits you ——"

He fancied that she shivered a little.

"I know," she said. "But, Joe, you've been wonderful, you know. And there are just the two of us. What would happen to me if you got hurt?"

"You'd have a start."

"Why do you want to do this for me?"

"Becos you're a gal, I reckon."

"Is that just the reason?"

Joe felt his blood run hot to his face. He fired his rifle twice. It was almost dark. It began to look like the windup.

"I reckon," he said, "thet it's becos it's you."

She was back of him. He felt her ad-

vance, felt the soft pressure of her body against his shoulders. Then she had kissed him. He felt as if a star had touched him—magical. For such rewards he could venture anything.

"I can't see to stop 'em any more," he told her. "Better be gettin' downstairs. But I'm goin' out first."

"It won't be the first time I've taken your orders, Joe," she said.

There was firing and shouting outside as they reached the floor. No shots striking the house. But the bang of rifles, a fusillade of barking pistols, the muffled sound of horses galloping! Knocking at the front door! The voice of Trediger.

"Open up, Joe! You all right? We got 'em runnin'!"

The words were high pitched, anxious. Joe ran to the door and opened it. Baldy and Trediger stood outside, guns in either hand. Baldy grinned at him. Trediger clapped him on the shoulder.

"Miss Whiting?"

"I'm all right, thanks to Joe. He kept them back of the trees. He hit one of them."

"So we saw. They tried to git us up canyon. We sorter suspicioned they might. Two of Reed's hired killers, on the cliffs. They fell fer my hat an' Baldy's shirt on the butt of his gun. Thought they killed us."

"They shot off the heel of my boot," growled Baldy. "But we played possum an' they come down to make sure. They're pretty fast," he went on, "but we was waitin' fer 'em an' we shot *jest* a mite faster. Thet's three out of Reed's outfit, not countin' one I think I winged jest now. We sure surprised 'em. They run like rabbits. Reckon you stampeded their hawsses, Joe."

"She shot with me," Joe answered.

"I'll be gewhizzled! An' you got yore man! Natural shot, thet's what you are, you shootin' of a gun!"

THE girl was talking to Trediger, looking up at him as he lit the lamps. They made a fine couple Joe, thought, a little wistfully. If she had wanted to kiss him, the "Runt," how must she feel towards Trediger, coming in the nick of time, to the rescue, outwitting and shooting the posted killers?

"Might as well leave the shutters fer a spell," said Trediger. "I don't believe they'll bother us any more ternight. They're ahead on the dam but we've got the house. Thet jig's up an' Reed 'll see the light. How about some supper?"

"I'll get it," said the girl, "if Joe 'll help me. Venison steaks."

During the meal they went over the whole thing again. Trediger was reticent but Baldy described with gusto how Mott and Landers had come prowling up among the rocks to finish them, how they had shifted their positions and, rising, shot it out.

"Then," Baldy concluded, "I put on my shirt agen an' we got our hawsses an' came burnin' leather. They was jest gettin' out from the trees when we come ridin'. If it hadn't been plumb dark they'd have been lyin' out there now. Five of 'em, you said, Joe, Reed's got another man in his outfit. Reckon they left him to home. He's checked—plenty."

"He may be able to scare up some men," said Trediger. "But they'd be Mexicans. Good in a rustlin' job, but they wouldn't want to tackle the house, or our guns. Reed may try to start somethin' with the cattle, or he may figger we'll lose 'em soon's the pools dry up. We kin afford to wait a day or so an' then we'll git through to town an' buy us some dynamite. It's the best chance. One of us 'll watch tonight."

The night and the next day passed off peaceably. The weather was unusually hot and Baldy prophesied rain.

"Which means a spell of rheumatiz fer me," he said. "If I let out a cuss word, you'll have to excuse me," he said to the girl. "It eases me. If the pain's extrry, I'll stay in my room," he added with a grin.

Trediger took Joe with him after breakfast. Joe mounted his horse under the other's approving eye.

"You'll make a rider," he said. "Got a good seat. We'll see what the stock is doin'. Stayin' nigh the crick, fer the pools, I reckon."

They found the cattle had drifted up toward the canyon, into the mouth of it.

"Good a place as any fer the time," said Trediger. "There's some grass there an' the pools. There's rain brewin' back of the range."

He surveyed the peaks, back of which the sky seemed hazy. If enough rain fell it might break the dam, restore the creek to its original course.

During the afternoon a dark cloud came over the crest of the range, high up, moving fast. Some few big drops fell from it.

"More comin'," said Baldy. "I feel it in my bones."

The western sky was overcast at sunset. The stars showed vaguely with scud fleeced out beneath them. Cecil Whiting played cards with them until ten o'clock and then went to bed. Baldy was to watch until midnight in case of alarm, Joe until two, and Trediger from them on. None of them turned in immediately. At eleven o'clock rain began to fall heavily. Trediger put on a slicker and went outside.

He came back quickly.

"Storm's comin," he said. "We got to git the stock out of the canyon. They may hev' bedded down. Cloudburst may catch 'em. You stay here, Baldy. I'll give Joe his first lesson. All we have to do is to git 'em started. Wire's holdin' em. They'll drift with the wind their own accord. Take Baldy's slicker, Joe. Bring along yore gun."

It was black as the interior of a mine outside and then a shaft of lightning broke through on top of the range. It revealed the split and livid edges of vapor, rolling low and heavy like a cloudy avalanche down the steeps. About them the rain came down like rods, glittering when the lightning flashed. A great crash of thunder sounded. In the next glare Joe saw the big cottonwoods, their boughs heavy with rain, writhing under the wind. He followed Trediger as best he could to the corral where two horses had been left saddled for emergency under a shelter shed. They mounted and galloped toward the canyon. Now and then the lightning was reflected in the pools and Joe saw Trediger ahead of him.

Suddenly he found Trediger beside him.

"Somethin' started the stock," he said. "They're comin' hell bent out of the canyon. It's funny. Crick ain't started to rise yet."

THUNDER again, lightning, the gateway cliffs of the canyon showing, a mass of huddled cattle racing out of it, the electric flares revealing their hides, slick, as if varnished, in the downpour, and the momentary flicker of horns.

"All we got to do," shouted Trediger, "is to keep 'em goin'. They'll quiet down when they hit the open range this side of wire. You stay this side, Joe, I'll ride swing on the other."

Joe guessed what he meant by "swing" as Trediger spurred his mount across the path of the oncoming cattle. They were startled, but they were not yet in actual stampede. There was water beginning to come down the creek. The artillery of the thunder boomed and the lightning flashed incessantly and Joe could see the lowering sky, rolling on before the gale. He saw one jagged dart of lightning stab at a bellying mass, rive it apart. He saw a swift glimpse of a torrent of water cascading from the rent. It hung right over the canyon.

Now they were riding beside the cattle, galloping on to more open land. They swung to the left and Joe swung with them. He could see the flash of Trediger's pistol and guessed he was turning them.

The leaders began to spread out their front, they ran more slowly. They broke up into groups, some of them standing with their rumps to the storm.

Trediger joined him.

"Cloudbust square in the canyon," he said, his usually calm voice eager. "Reckon they smelled it comin' Joe, she may bust thet dam! Let's take a looksee."

When they reached the creek they did not have to wait for lightning to show them that it was in full spate. It was rushing white and crested with a noise that sounded above the storm. The house was on high ground but the water was rising at a tremendous rate. Trediger did not seem alarmed.

"She won't do much harm," he said. "I'll bet thet dam's gone. Here comes topwater now. Cows 'll git to the high ground safe enough. Here's where Reed loses his stolen crick."

A big wave raced toward them, seething, carrying stranded logs it had swept out of the canyon. One after another they came lunging down as the lightning showed them, glaring less frequently now, the thunder diminishing.

"We've had the worst of it, Joe. Happens quick but it's soon over. Main storm 'll break fur out on the flats. We jest got a busted cloud. *What's thet?"*

Joe had seen it. A great tree, forked, riding the furious waves. Clinging to it the arm of a man, his body submerged. They saw, as a flash lit up the sky and land and angry water, his head rear up for a moment. Then the tree rolled, seemed to strike a rock, rearing, leaping on, flinging the man into the torrent. That was the end of him. They rode to the edge of the furious creek but they could not stem those raging billows. He was gone. His face had been covered with blood. Rescue was hopeless.

The man, carried along, battered and broken, was Reed.

"Joe," said Trediger. "We'll find more bodies tomorrer. The stock didn't stampede on its own account. I thought it was funny. Reed an' his outfit come down canyon to rustle 'em, an' the cloudbust caught 'em. They're wiped out.

"We'll tell Cecil in the mornin'," he added gravely. "She won't have to bother none about holdin' Palos Verdes after this."

"PALOS VERDES," said Cecil Whiting, "is going to be incorporated. There are going to be four equal partners in it. That's why I had Mr. Smithers come over, to draw up the papers. I'm setting my ownership against your experience and the fact that, if it wasn't for the three of you, I wouldn't have the place at all. I've listened to all your objections and I'm going to have my own way. I've been browbeaten enough as it is."

She flashed a smile at Joe, sitting with Trediger and Baldy on one side of the table, the girl and the lawyer on the other.

"We may have to scrimp to get through, but you told me yourselves the ranch could be made to pay eventually. And it will. If you don't accept my terms," she said, lifting her hand against protests, "I'll go back East and sell it. I mean it. You'll be driving me away by your obstinacy from the place I love."

The three looked at each other, silenced for the moment. Smithers cleared his throat, handling the papers on which he had been writing.

"It seems to be a good arrangement," he said. "And a profitable one. Please sign here, Trediger. You next Burton, and then Cross."

Automatically they scrawled their signatures on the lines indicated. Trediger stood up.

"I reckon we'll do the best we kin by you," he said.

"There is a possible contingency to be considered," said Smithers. "If Miss Whiting should get married——" The girl laughed.

"Never mind that contingency," she said. "If that happens it will make no difference. I'll even promise not to marry off the ranch," she added gaily.

BALDY scratched his bald dome. Trediger showed no sign. Joe felt himself flushing. He glanced from Trediger to the girl. If they married, if that was what she meant, or half meant—perhaps there was already an understanding between them—it would be fine, he told himself. And then he met her eyes. They were smiling at him and he became confused.

"Me," said Baldy. "I don't know about

the woman's side of it, but I wouldn't advise no one to marry. I've tried it."

That relieved the tension. Smithers folded up his papers.

Joe wandered into the patio and stood looking into the little pool. Then he saw another face reflected beside him.

"Doesn't the arrangement satisfy you, Joe?" she asked.

"I don't think it's fair to you," he replied. "All right fer Sam an' Baldy, they're tophands. Me, I'm jest a tenderfoot runt."

"If you're a runt, Joe, there's a pair of us. What were you thinking about when you looked at Sam and me, Joe, just now?"

He forced himself to meet her eyes, saw something there that made his pulses leap.

"I was thinkin'," he said slowly, "thet if you did marry, you an' Trediger'd make a fine match."

"If I do marry anyone—on the ranch—Joe," she said, "It can't be Baldy. And—it won't be Sam Trediger."

They were quite alone. Trediger was driving Smithers to Vacada and Baldy had gone with them.

"I'm not crazy about tall men, Joe." He stood stock still, not daring to interpret her words while he hoped, as the iris of her eyes had bade him hope.

"You haven't returned what I gave you in the attic, Joe," she said softly. "It was only a loan, you know."

The Runt was drowned in the patio pool that afternoon. He was never seen again. They have another name for the husband of Mrs. Cross in and about Vacada. And, when Baldy told the full story of the fight at Palos Verdes it never had to be enforced at gunpoint by the owner. It is a nickname and spoken of in friendship. They call him "The Fightin' Tenderfoot." It will change soon for Joe is not much of a tenderfoot. As for Sam and Baldy, they called him "The Kid" until someone else appeared to claim that sobriquet.

Joe and his wife measured him one day. They did that on an average of seven times a week.

"He's shootin' fast," said Joe.. "Another inch. He's goin' to be tall, honey. They won't ever call him a——" Cecil's hand was over his mouth.

"That name is tabooed, Joe," she said, and exchanged her soft palm for softer lips.

LONE BUTTE

By HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

Author of "The Bigelow Boys," "The Two Saddles," etc.

BOTH GRIM, SOLITARY, RUGGED—LONE BUTTE AND YARDLAW, THE DEPUTY SHERIFF. AND THE PICTURE THAT WAS TO HAUNT TO HIS DYING DAY "THE KID"—WANTED FOR THE KILLING OF OLD MAN RANKIN—WAS THE DEPUTY STANDING, HIS SHORT RIFLE HELD BELT-HIGH AS HE FIRED SHOT AFTER SHOT AT THE TWO MEN WHO HAD LEAPED FROM BEHIND THE SHOULDER OF THE BUTTE, THEIR GUNS CHOPPING UP AND DOWN AS THEY CAME AT HIM

OLD MAN RANKIN was found in a draw some eight or ten miles north of Rainbow with a clean, purple-edged bullet hole between his eyes, a six-shooter in his hand, and near him the ashes of a small fire. A short running iron lay a few feet from the heap of ashes. Among the major incidentals were cattle tracks and letter-plain evidence that a calf had been roped and thrown. Old Man Rankin's horse had come into town with reins dragging. Someone telephoned to Lester, the county-seat. The sheriff and his deputy, Dick Yardlaw, arrived in Rainbow three hours later. They questioned the man who had back-tracked Rankin's horse and found the body. He happened to be Rankin's nearest neighbor, and his bitterest enemy. They both ran cattle north of Rainbow on the same range. Old Man Rankin's herd increased a little faster than was considered natural even in that country. The neighbor knew who was branding his calves, but he couldn't prove it.

Under the circumstances, it didn't look any too promising for the neighbor. Rainbow shook its head and looked wise. Rainbow liked the neighbor, and didn't, as a community, mourn the passing of Old Man Rankin. Yet Rainbow had to admit that it knew and had prophesied that the neighbor and Old Man Rankin would tangle some day. Rainbow also admitted that it was somewhat surprised when the neighbor rode in on a lathered pony and put a rope around his own neck.

The sheriff's perspective was not at all fogged by local opinion. "Did you have a gun on you when you rode out to look for Rankin?" he asked. The neighbor offered to produce his gun. The sheriff told him to keep it. "You're over on Willow Creek, aren't you?" he asked the neighbor. "Suppose we ride over and look 'round?"

THEY set out for Willow Creek, the sheriff, the neighbor and Dick Yardlaw. The sheriff and the neighbor rode together. Yardlaw rode a few paces behind them.

When they came to the spot where the horse tracks to and from the draw crossed the Willow Creek road, the neighbor swung

north to follow the tracks. The sheriff glanced round at Dick Yardlaw, who responded with a brief nod.

"Did you fill your canteen, Dick?" asked the sheriff.

Again Yardlaw nodded. The neighbor led. The sheriff and Yardlaw followed, but not in single file. The sheriff rode a little to the left of the tracks, Yardlaw a little to the right. They had the utmost confidence in the neighbor's intentions. yet they had acquired certain habits in their calling.

THEY sweltered in the heat of the July sun, a sun that bit wherever it touched. The sand-glare burned their eyelids. Far to the north. Lone Butte swam in a haze of heat. The neighbor pulled up at the mouth of the draw. The sheriff and Yardlaw reined in on either side of him. A few yards beyond lay Old Man Rankin, on his back. Yardlaw dismounted and walked to the body. He glanced down, walked around the dead man, stirred the ashes with his hand. He picked up Rankin's gun. "Two empties, three loads," he said. He picked up the short running-iron and rubbed it across the palm of his hand. It left a faint black mark. An iron that had not been recently in the fire would leave no mark.

"That's just the way I found him," said the neighbor.

Yardlaw walked a few yards up the draw, and then came back to the sheriff. "He fired twice. The man that got him was on a horse. Rankin was on foot."

"Is that right?" said the sheriff, turning to the neighbor.

"That's how I figured it. You can see where somebody rode up to the edge of the draw and then churned up the sand and started north. I only took a look. Wanted to get to town and send word to you."

"Suppose we ride up the draw and see where those tracks come from," suggested the sheriff.

The neighbor, whose name was John Cullum, was surprised that the sheriff should seem more interested in where the tracks came from than where they went. He was even more surprised when it became evident that the tracks had been made by somone riding from the direction of Willow Springs, Cullum's own headquarters. Cullum was a heavy man, florid, and the heat bothered him. Yet his back grew clammy and chill in spite of the heat, in spite of the fact that he knew no more about the killing of Old Man Rankin than did the sheriff, or Dick Yardlaw. The tracks came evenly from the west, the horse that had made them had been going at a brisk walk. A horse with a long stride. Most cow ponies were short gaited.

"Walking horse, for sure," said the sheriff.

Cullum raised his head with a jerk. "Noticed that," he said, shrugging his shoulders. Had any of his boys tangled with Old Man Rankin? Steve, or Jed, or Jimmy Bender? Steve and Jed were over on the west side of the range—had been for a week. Jimmy Bender was at the ranch-house, repairing the power pump. Jimmy hadn't said anything about going to town, although he had asked Cullum to fetch some tobacco, when he left, that morning. The tracks stopped at the hitch-rail. Cullum dismounted and opened the yard gate. The horses would want water. The sheriff and Yardlaw followed Cullum to the corral.

"John," said the sheriff. "somebody stopped here this morning after you left. It was after you left, wasn't it? Well, I'd like to know who he was. Rode a fast walking horse with a long stride. You don't have to tell Mrs. Cullum and your daughter what happened first thing, do you?"

"Jimmy's over there, working on the pump. If anyone rode up, he must have seen them."

"Jimmy won't talk—now that I'm here," stated the sheriff.

"I'll look after the horses," said Yardlaw. He meant considerably more than that. John Cullum glanced nervously toward the house. The sheriff saw Jimmy Bender wipe his hands on a bit of old rag, toss it down and start toward the bunkhouse.

"Wait a minute," called the sheriff. "Dick wants to talk to you."

Jimmy hesitated. John Cullum gestured to him to come over. Jimmy bow-legged across the yard, nodded to the sheriff and questioned Cullum with a glance.

"It's all right," said Cullum.

The sheriff smiled. If the rest of Cullum's men were as loyal as Jimmy—

"Somebody killed Old Man Rankin this morning," stated the sheriff.

Jimmy curled a cigarette and lighted it. "In town?" he asked.

"No. Out on the flats, north of town."

"Well, I'm listenin'," said Jimmy.

"Rankin's horse drifted in to Rainbow," said the sheriff. "Rankin was shot through the head. John, here, found him—and the ashes of a fire and a running iron. There were three loads left in his gun."

"Well, what more do you want?" queried Jimmy.

"The man that shot him."

"Oh, hell! Anybody would 'a' been glad to do that."

"Any Willow Springs warrior?" queried the sheriff.

"Speakin' for myself—yes. He never gave me a chance."

"Who rides the fastest walking horse up in this country?" asked the sheriff.

"I do," said Jimmy promptly. "There he is, over in the corral. Yardlaw has been sizin' him up ever since he came."

"Good boy," said the sheriff. "But we're not after you or John."

"Just visitin', eh?"

"Just visiting. Had any more visitors this morning?"

"Hell, I don't know. I been wranglin' machinery."

"I see you have. Saw you at it from the road, down there."

"Which means I could see the road from where I was workin'."

"I suppose you saw all you wanted to see," said the sheriff, easily. "I'll just step in and say hello to Mrs. Cullum and your daughter, John."

Mrs. Cullum, a thin, tired-looking little woman with faded blue eyes, welcomed the sheriff with an old-fashioned formality that did not quite hide her nervousness. She asked him to stay to dinner, while she wondered what had brought him there. And she wondered why Dick Yardlaw hadn't come in. Something was wrong. Her husband's face told her that. He was worried. And she caught her husband and her daughter Bess exchanging occasional glances, as they all sat at the kitchen table eating dinner.

"How did you happen to ride over our way?" finally asked Bess Cullum.

"Your father will tell you, after I leave," said the sheriff. "I don't want to spoil a good dinner, talking business."

"I called Jimmy. Wonder why he doesn't come in," said Bess Cullum.

"I guess he's visiting with Dick Yardlaw," said the sheriff. "Probably they're arguing as to who owns the fastest walking horse up around this end of the country. Jimmy says he does. And Dick thinks he's got a pretty good horse, himself."

"Too bad Bert wouldn't stay for dinner," said Mrs. Cullum. "He's always bragging about that big bay horse of his. Jimmy and Bert like to had a fight,. last time he was here. Bert—"

"I'll call Jimmy," said Bess Cullum getting up hurriedly.

JOHN CULLUM gazed stolidly at his wife. Bess had gone out to call Jimmy to dinner. She shouldn't have done that. And why had his wife mentioned Bert? Cullum shifted his gaze to the sheriff. Sheriff Applegate seemed to be enjoying his dinner. Now if Bess had only sat still, when her mother mentioned Bert's name. But, no, she had to hide her nervousness by flouncing out of the room. And Applegate was no fool. He hadn't asked any questions, nor had he paid any attention to what seemed a mighty important matter, the fact that young Bert Ransom had stopped by at the ranch that morning.

"It's—I was going to say, Rankin was killed this morning," blurted Cullum. "I found him in a draw, north of town. I—well, I wanted you to know, mother, before Bess came in."

"Why, John! Ed Rankin? You don't mean—?"

"Fact," said the sheriff. "Your husband reported to me and showed me where he found him. Too bad. Looks bad. But don't worry, Mrs. Cullum. We know John didn't do it. Or if he did, he's got more nerve

than I have. But somebody did it. Somebody rode from the ranch, here, over to that draw, this morning."

"But you went to town, John!" said Mrs. Cullum, questioning her husband with weary, frightened eyes.

"Saw a couple of buzzards circling low, when I left the road and cut across to the draw. Thought mebbe it was a dead critter." Cullum tried to speak naturally. He was telling a straight story, but in spite of that he couldn't help feeling guilty. Rankin and he had been enemies so long, and people had talked so much.

Bess Cullum came in. Her face was flushed, and her eyes too bright. "Jimmy won't come to dinner," she said, glancing at Sheriff Applegate. "Jimmy says he's lost his appetite."

For a few seconds no one spoke. Then Bess added, hastily," Mr. Yardlaw has gone."

"Now that's right queer!" stated Sheriff Applegate, who didn't think it was queer at all.

"I'm sorry he wouldn't stay to dinner," said Mrs. Cullum.

"He's a peculiar man," declared the sheriff. "I know it, for I ran him over into Mexico once, myself."

"Well," said Bess Cullum, "there's something wrong, and I want to know what it is." Her question was directed at her father.

"Why, Miss Bessie," said the sheriff, "Old Man Rankin was killed this morning. And from what I can see, either your father or Bert Ransom had a hand in it. That's why I'm here. I didn't want to come here, but I had to. Now—"

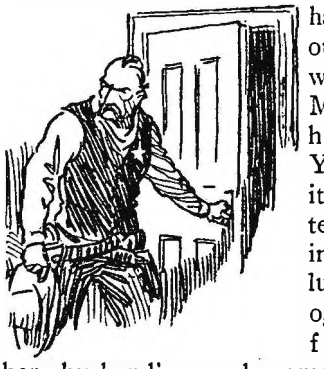
The sheriff paused. Bess Cullum stared at him with widening eyes. The color left her face. "It wasn't Bert!" she whispered, her lips trembling.

Mrs. Cullum's faded cheeks grew red. "Do you realize what you are saying?" she asked, shrill temper in her voice. "And your own father here in the room!" Mrs. Cullum turned toward the sheriff, who had risen from the table. "So it is my husband or Bert Ransom murdered Old Rankin? Well, I can tell you John is no murderer. And you come smiling in here and sit down at my table—"

"Mother!" Cullum raised his hand.

"It's tough," said Applegate. "But put yourself in my place. John, I'll be going. If you hear anything, let me know."

Both Bess Cullum and her mother stared at the sheriff. So he wasn't going to arrest anyone at the ranch. He was going. Mrs. Cullum was glad. She felt that she had been too hasty. Bess Cullum turned and left the room. The sheriff picked up his hat and strode out. He had wanted to thank Mrs. Cullum for her hospitality. Yet he thought it would be better to say nothing. Mrs. Cullum would apologize—apologize for defending her husband's good name. The sheriff didn't want her to do that.



Sheriff Applegate had counted the horses in Cullum's corral as he rode in with Yardlaw. Counted them at a glance. There were seven. Now there were six. He knew which horse had been taken from the corral. It was his habit to keep track of horses, note their color, markings, brands, and any peculiarities that might distinguish one from another. Dick Yardlaw had left. Well, Dick knew his business. And he didn't like to talk to women. Queer hombre, Yardlaw, but a mighty keen tracker. Ought to be. He had dodged trackers enough, before he took the job as deputy.

Applegate heard Cullum coming from the house. Cullum's step was heavy and slow. The sheriff mounted his horse and swung him round.

"Jimmy Bender gone to town?" queried the sheriff.

Cullum glanced around, noticed that one of the horses was gone. "Didn't say he was going. Mebbe he's over in the bunkhouse."

But Jimmy Bender wasn't in the bunkhouse, nor were his chaps, spurs, saddle or rifle.

"Jimmy's drifted," said Cullum as he came back.

"If he's trailing Yardlaw, he stands a good chance of getting hurt," said Applegate.

"Ed, you been pretty decent," said Cullum. "Any time you want me, I'll be here."

"That's all right, John. This Bert Ransome, now. Fred Ransom's boy, ain't he? Comes from over on the Mormon River. He's been calling here pretty regular, I should say."

"Yes he has. He and Bess—"

"Well, I guess I'll be drifting. My regards to Mrs. Cullum and Miss Bessie."

SHERIFF APPLEGATE rode out beyond the cottonwoods that fringed the road, and glanced up at the sky. A yellowish streak of cloud lay close to the western horizon. Out on the flats to the east the dust devils spun and writhed.

A vapor hazed the sun. The flat land reflected a peculiar light that seemed to lay just above it—a sort of artificial light such as illumines the desert before a storm. Far out across the mesa a diminishing black dot bored into the east, its motion only discernible when it crossed a rise of ground. Yardlaw was riding a big circle to cut the tracks of the fast-walking horse. Evidentiy he surmised that his men had made for the bad-lands north of Rainbow. And, if such were the case, thought Applegate, Yardlaw was heading into a storm and a country gutted and scoured by cloudbursts—a dangerous country in that season.

The sheriff headed for Rainbow, his horse going at an easy lope. The air grew dark and heavy. A cool wind rippled the sparse grasses. The yellowish streak of cloud in the west deepened and spread. About half way to town the sheriff saw Jimmy Bender as he came pounding along at a gallop on a lathered horse. Jimmy Bender swung wide and kept on.

"Cullum's girl sent him to Rainbow, figuring young Ransom rode south," soliloquized the sheriff. "Or else he's been trying to track Ransom, and couldn't find a sign, south of the draw."

SHERIFF APPLEGATE had plenty to occupy his mind. Eliminating John Cullum, who was obviously innocent of the killing, there remained two factors in the problem: Bert Ransom, who had called at the Cullum ranch that morning, and an unknown man who had shot and killed Old Man Rankin. If the unknown and Bert Ransom happened to be one and the same person, the solution of the problem would be the capture of Bert Ransom. But first, it would have to be proved that Bert Ransom and the unknown were one and the same. Yardlaw was tracking an unknown man. He didn't know what the fugitive looked like, nor his name, nor anything about him, except that he rode a long-striding, fast-walking horse. And perhaps it was just as well Yardlaw didn't know, because then he would have no preconceived ideas. Circumstantial evidence would guide him. The hoof tracks from Cullum's ranch up to the edge of the arroyo, the same tracks going from the arroyo, and, above all, the direction in which they went. If, as Applegate surmised, the tracks headed into the bad-lands, the fact was pretty plain evidence that the horseman was trying to escape. No man at all familiar with the country would deliberately ride into the bad-lands in that season, or in any season, without a most serious reason for doing so. An old hand would never do that. An old hand would make for the border. Sheriff Applegate allowed himself to believe that the slayer of Rankin was a young man, and was in a panic; that their meeting had been accidental, and the killing unpremeditated. The sheriff formulated a theory as he rode along, glancing occasionally at the sky. The unknown had taken a short cut toward Rainbow. He had been riding along at a brisk walk, intending to skirt the edge of the arroyo and cross at its shallower end. He had come suddenly upon a man branding a calf with a short iron. Whether or not the unknown and the man with the branding iron had exchanged words was of no consequence.

They had exchanged shots. Rankin had fired twice, rather good evidence that he had not been murdered. The unknown may have fired more than once, but that was doubtful. Sheriff Applegate believed that Rankin had fired first. Question: had he hit the unknown? Was the unknown wounded? Question: had Old Man Rankin mistaken the unknown for one of the Cul-

lum cowboys? Question: who had turned the calf loose, after Rankin was killed? Was the calf still hog-tied when John Cullum discovered the dead man, or had the unknown turned the calf loose after killing Rankin?

John Cullum had said nothing about finding a calf hog-tied. But perhaps he had taken it for granted that the evidence of the fire, the iron and the cattle tracks in the arroyo was sufficient for the officers. After Sheriff Applegate had made his deductions he tossed them away as so much chaff. He was too old in experience to take anything for granted. He knew that the most logical theories sometimes fell apart like a house of cards. So when he arrived in Rainbow, just before the gathering storm broke and drove the citizens scurrying for shelter in home, in livery stable, in pool-hall and saloon, the sheriff had nothing to say in reply to a dozen different questions from as many curious folk.

His silence did not please certain of the citizens, who, after several drinks and a secret session, declared that if the sheriff didn't get busy, they would, as a posse. They were in the Roscoe saloon at the time, and delivered their ultimatum in a body to Applegate, who was shaking dice with the proprietor and incidentally finding out something about the habits and reputation of Bert Ransom.

The sheriff listened, but kept on shaking dice. "All right," he said, making a throw, "I'll swear you all in. But that don't mean you'll ride over to Willow Springs and bother John Cullum, or butt into Dick Yardlaw's game. Because"—here he gathered up the dice and shook the box—"I'll ride with you."

It was a simple little speech, as offhand as his manner of throwing dice, but it served to discourage the self-elected posse. Then, because he understood humans, he asked them all to have a drink. He had been elected sheriff of the county five times in succession. He knew how to handle men. Perhaps the best proof of this was the fact that Yardlaw was his deputy. Yardlaw and the sheriff had been old-time enemies in the days when Yardlaw had been known in four states as a cattle-thief and a killer. No one knew just how Yardlaw and Sheriff Applegate became friends. Yet they were friends, and Dick Yardlaw was the best deputy sheriff the county had known, possibly because Ed Applegate never asked a man to do anything he wouldn't do himself.

THE now thoroughly disorganized posse felt at liberty, as individuals, to ask a few questions. The sheriff was noncommital. He did say, however, that Dick Yardlaw was tracking the person suspected of having killed Old Man Rankin and would probably get his man.

"You see," said the sheriff, "Dick never lets up. He can ride longer without grub or water, track better and draw quicker than any man I ever tangled with."

That night the sheriff played poker with four of the leading citizens. About midnight the bridge over Rainbow River went out. The river was bank full and running like a stampeded horse-herd. When the sheriff and his companions heard the news, one of them said, "You won't be able to get back to Lester for a day or two."

"That's all right," said Applegate, "I figured to stay here until Dick Yardlaw got back."

"Sounds like you was bettin' on a sure thing," declared one of the poker players, who didn't seem to be able to draw the right cards.

"As for that," and the sheriff shoved his stack of blues into the pot, "it would depend on the man, wouldn't it?" Anyhow, it will cost you fifty to see."

"You fellows play a hot game over to Lester," said another of the group, as Applegate raked in the pot.

"Almost anywhere," said the sheriff. "Lester, Rainbow, Redbank, or up in the bad-lands. Too bad Dick couldn't have sat in on this. He plays a better game than I do."

WHEN Dick Yardlaw left Cullum's ranch he expected to be followed. Jimmy Bender, instead of going in to dinner, had walked over to the bunkhouse, and entering it had shut the door. Shortly after that Bess Cullum had come from the house, and glancing about, had walked over to the men's quarters. She called Jimmy's name. When the bunkhouse door opened, Yardlaw caught a glimpse of Jimmy, who had put on his chaps. Bess Cullum stepped into the bunkhouse and the door closed. Yardlaw's lean, hard face, and his hard gray eyes were expressionless. He was gazing at Lone Butte, barely visible in the haze of the bad-lands. There was a storm coming, a storm that would sweep the bad-lands before it hit Willow Springs and passed south and east toward Rainbow.

As he had read the tracks at the draw, the unknown had ridden north. Yardlaw bridled his horse, pulled up the loosened cinch and mounted. His job was to capture his man. And he went at it as though he and the fugitive were the only two persons on earth. The sheriff, the Cullums and Jimmy Bender didn't count, nor, as far as Yardlaw was concerned, did Old Man Rankin. Yardlaw had served in a grim school, himself a fugitive. He knew both sides of the game. He expected to be followed. But he didn't intend to let anyone hinder or delay him. If Jimmy Bender was fool enough to follow too close Cullum would lose a cow-hand, and lose him permanently. Yardlaw decided that quite as unemotionally as he pulled up the loose cinch.

By riding straight east from the ranch, he would cut the trail of the fugitive, learn how fast he was traveling, and taking into consideration the storm which threatened, estimate about how far the other would ride before the storm would drive him into the shelter of some cave or behind some wall or rock. Yardlaw carried a canteen, food in his saddle-bags, and a short 30-40 Winchester under his leg. The rifle was exceptional in that it had an eighteen-inch barrel, was resighted for use at close range, and had a magazine filled with soft-nosed cartridges. In Yardlaw's hands it was both six-gun and rifle. He carried no other weapon.

The clumps of sparse grass, the greasewood and the rabbit-weed gave way to barren flats of coarse sand streaked with shallow washes of reddish clay. Outcroppings of rock showed here and there, black rock weathered to a dull glaze. The tracks of the fugitive's horse bore straight toward the heart of the bad-lands, as Yardlaw had surmised they would, after cutting into them some two miles east of the Cullum ranch. An occasional gust of cold wind swept down from the north, followed by a heavy stagnation of summer heat.

Yardlaw's unwavering gaze was fixed on Lone Butte toward which the tracks led. Lone Butte and its volcanic caves had long since been a rendezvous for outlaws, notably a hiding place for horsethieves running stolen stock from the north down to the border. There was a spring of good water under the north wall of the butte. The south wall was honeycombed with volcanic caves, natural fortifications, impossible to approach unseen. Yardlaw knew the country, in fact knew it too well for an honest man. When he and the sheriff rode up to the draw where Old Man Rankin was found, and realized that Rankin's slayer was headed north, the sheriff and Yardlaw immediately arrived at an understanding without saying a word. Preceding this, Sheriff Applegate had said, "Did you fill your canteen, Dick?" A seemingly inconsequential question. The sheriff had surmised that the fugitive had ridden into the bad-lands, knew that his deputy was familiar with the country, and, without comment or instructions, had turned the job over to him.

YARDLAW watched the storm roll down and break in vivid flashes of lightning. The distant, dull rumble of thunder followed each ragged flash. Who but a fool or a madman would plod on toward that shelterless region, toward the treachery of quicksands, the risk of drown-

ing in some swift rush of a torrent down an arroyo, toward the chance of being picked off by the unknown hiding behind some boulder? Yardlaw was neither fool nor madman. But he was what is commonly called a fatalist. He had a job to do. He would get his man, or the man would get him, or the elements would get him. He had taken so many chances in his life that a few more didn't count. But he did not invite disaster. He was exceedingly careful, so careful, in fact, that, upon approaching the broken country surrounding Lone Butte he swung away from the tracks he had been following, and rode toward the higher land toward the east. Thus he would lose time for a while. But the barrier of the storm would make up for that.

No human being, no horse would or could battle through the storm, which rushed, in a long, rolling black mass across the barrens bordering the tortuous defiles and ragged pinnacles and buttes that surrounded Lone Butte itself. A few, scattering drops of rain hissed down the slant of the wind. Yardlaw untied his slicker and swung into it as he rode. He pulled the throat latch from the crown of his hat and slipped it under his chin. A ripping zig-zag of lightning and a crash of thunder over Lone Butte, and Yardlaw swung still farther toward the east.

He rode along the edge of the basin of the bad-lands, recalling the landmarks and choosing his course cannily. The wind, laden with stinging rain, flattened the brim of his Stetson against the crown and whipped the ends of his slicker. Rivulets formed on the basin's edge and raced toward the hollow of the bad-lands. Yardlaw rode up and around the shallow end of an arroyo, already half-filled with a brown surge of water. The wind died out suddenly. From the gray-black mass of cloud that blanketed the land to twilight, burst a staggering bolt of fire. Followed instantly the roar of rain so dense that Yardlaw could not see beyond his horse's ears. A shallow lake rose as though forced out of the earth.

The horse plodded across it and swung toward still higher ground. On a ridge which ran east and west, Yardlaw reined in and gazed toward the dim bulk of Lone Butte, discernible only because it was darker than the rain. The ridge, he knew, ran on down into the bad-lands, ending about a hundred yards from the east wall of the butte. From the end of the ridge to the butte lay a floor of lava, undulating and as smooth as grass. The low spots in the lava would be covered with water, but the footing would be solid, though treacherously smooth. Once across he would be able to find comparative shelter somewhere along the eastern wall of the butte.

THE cloudburst was succeeded by a steady, downright rush of rain. Yardlaw knew that the rain would continue until the wind rose again. The air had become chill, yet the heat of the horse, rising in the slicker, kept Yardlaw warm. Obediently the horse turned and worked down the long gravelly dyke.

In half an hour the end of the dyke was reached. Beyond it gleamed a stretch of water. The horse hesitated, trembling. Yardlaw spurred him into it. The water rose to the horse's knees, to his shoulders. Then the level seemed to subside as the animal found footing on a rounded stretch of glistening black lava. Yardlaw dismounted and led the animal, not through any fondness for him however. As he took good care of his rifle and his equipment, so he took good care of his horse. Nor did he think of his own risk, should the horse fall. His job was to get his man. He employed incidental cautiousness to that end. Several times he waded shallow hollows of lava, going carefully, giving his horse every chance to take care of itself.

Finally he came to the end of the smooth going, as the glistening wall of the butte loomed above him, its base fringed with huge squares and slabs and splinters of rock, riven and slipped from the upper walls by time and weather. There was no trail to follow, no continuous opening. He had to pick his way among the gigantic fragments and keep close to the wall. In dry weather he would have ridden farther out, on the gravel and sand. Now the sloping land beyond the base of the butte was the bed of a thousand torrents.

Working south, grimly patient, he rounded the shoulder of the great table rock and climbing a gentle slope, led his horse beneath an overhang which jutted out like the roof of a curved porch. The clay flooring, red and of a coarse grain, was dry.

The horse sniffed at it, and stood with head down and tail tucked. Yardlaw dropped the reins, took the rifle from its scabbard and wiped it carefully with his bandanna. He stood the short rifle against the wall of the shallow cave, and spreading his slicker on the ground, sat down and made a cigarette. He blew the smoke from his nostrils as he gazed out at the wall of rain, fringed with a silvery mist where it rebounded from earth and rock.

The storm was working toward the south. Black in the distance, gray above the bad-lands. An hour, and Yardlaw saw that which would have amazed one unaccustomed to that country. The rain thinned, became, in the immediate vicinity a mist. Suddenly the westering sun flamed out, gleaming and glistening on pool and stream and rock as the storm moved majestically down the wide mesas of the south, its edge as sharply defined as though it had been hewn from solid granite. The vale of sunlight between Lone Butte and the receding storm widened and spread, cast a soft radiance about itself, dimmed to pale gold, to gray, and swiftly the contours of the wild and rugged pinnacles and domes and minarets melted into night.

Yardlaw ate a can of sardines, munched a handful of crackers, drank from his canteen. He took a few ears of dried corn from a saddle bag, shelled the corn into his hat and held it while the horse ate. Then he led the horse out and down the scattered boulders till he found a shallow pool, where the thirsty animal drank eagerly.

Back in the cave he hobbled the horse with a piece of soft rope, and leaving the reins down, took his rifle and started to walk round the south wall of the butte.

ALONG the south wall were numerous caves, once the habitations of a prehistoric people. Most of the caves were small, scarcely head high, averaging some eight or ten feet in width and as much in depth. But among them, toward the middle of the cliff was a cave big enough to accommodate a half-dozen men and their horses. In front of this cave, and out from it some fifteen or twenty yards, ran an ancient, low stone wall, breast high, and constituting, as Yardlaw knew only too well, an excellent barrier of defense. On, past the big cave, and built against the cliff, was a stone-walled corral which had held more than one band of stolen horses. Yardlaw had helped build the corral himself. From the big cave, a lookout could scan miles of country, could command all approaches as long as daylight lasted. And few, save the outlaws themselves, ever rode into the bad-lands at night. It was for that reason that he had made his journey on foot. He was handicapped by darkness and the risk of a fall, for the ground below the cliff was strewn with fragments of rock, small, sharp edged chunks, and cubes higher than his head.

As he approached each cave, he paused and listened, before passing it. His progress was painfully slow and deliberate. Frequently he stood listening, for several minutes, an upright shadow among the shadowy rocks. Once he imagined he heard a monotonous voice toned to a hoarse whisper. Finally he distinguished it as the steady drip of water from the roof of one of the caves. The stillness and darkness tuned his hearing to a high pitch. He kept close to the face of the cliff, bearing away from it only when forced to do so by the fallen rock.

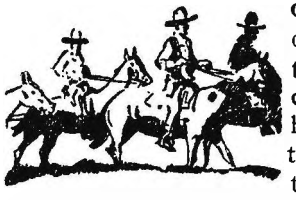
He had passed the openings of several of the prehistoric caves and knew himself to be near the central cave, when he thought he saw a faint glimmer of light on the face of an upright slab opposite the big cave. Instantly he became as rigid as though he were a part of the cliff itself. He could not see the entrance to the big cave

because of the curve of the rocky wall beyond him. The dim outline of the upright slab showed dull and shadowy. Perhaps he had caught the glint of starlight on rain blackened rock. But he took nothing for granted. A minute or so he waited, gazing toward the slab. Again he saw a faint, reddish glint which almost immediately subsided. This time he knew he was not mistaken.

AND as cautiously as he had approached he turned and back-tracked perhaps a hundred yards, when, with infinite caution he began to descend the gentle slope that ran from the base of the butte to the bottom level of the great basin. As he descended, step by step, feeling his way, he paused occasionally to glance back at the cliff. Presenty he stopped and stood staring at the mouth of the big cave. Its arching edge was dimly outlined by a light which came from within. Back in the cave he could discern the glow of a tiny fire.

He reasoned swiftly. There was no fuel in the immediate vicinity. The fuel for the fire had been packed in. A man fleeing into the bad-lands would not stop to gather fuel. But a number of men traveling through the bad-lands might pack in a few greasewood roots with which to make coffee.

Turning, he kept on descending the easy slope until he reached the sandy level of the basin. There he turned and strode west, far out from Lone Butte, and circling it until he came opposite the horse-corral several hundred yards above. Then he worked up the slope until he was within a few yards of the corral against the cliff. He heard horses moving about. He crept on up, his short rifle cocked and held in one hand. Peering over the edge of the corral he counted five horses, From their attitudes, and the fact that they scarcely noticed his approach, he judged they were leg weary—had been ridden hard and far. Were their riders traveling north or south, and was the man he wanted among them?



Who these men were, their business in the Lone Butte country meant nothing to Yardlaw, so long as they did not interfere with him. He surmised they were a shady outfit, else they would have avoided the bad-lands. Their presence complicated matters, but so long as they did not know of his presence, he had the advantage of them. He was considering the advisability of waiting until daylight before he attempted to go any farther in his search for the fugitive, when fate determined his next move, which was to crouch down behind the west wall of the corral. He had heard the sound of boot-heels on the rocks, someone was coming from the cave toward the corral. The someone stumbled, and cursed. Yardlaw heard the sound of voices, two voices, one high-pitched and querulous, the other heavy and hoarse. The stumbling footsteps came on. The tired horses moved about in the corral, as though they knew the voices and feared them.

"Where the hell did you leave the wood, anyhow?" questioned the hoarse voice.

"Where we unsaddled, along side of this here bull-pen."

"Jim's all excited about that there stranger. And he's nothin' but a kid. Here's the dam' wood, and it's plenty wet. Jim can't make the kid talk. Say, wait a minute! You kin pack some of this as well as me. Like to broke a leg on the dam' rocks."

"It ain't the kid, so much," said the hoarse voice. "It's them saddle-bags and what's in 'em. The kid knows it ain't sugar. Looks like Whisky wants a little more light so he can see to bump the kid off, which same ain't necessary accordin' to my way of thinkin'. All Jim's got to do is to take the kid's hoss along when we pull out in the mornin', and leave the kid afoot. Chances are he wouldn't get out of here to tell anybody what he seen."

"Jim's gettin' cold feet, that's what," said the high-pitched voice. "We made our getaway, so far, and now he aims to cut the stuff four ways, and every man for himself, from now on."

"Well, dam' if I care," said the hoarse voice. "But that kid made a fool play when he said he was headin' north. He should have throwed in with us, and made

for the line. Told Jim he'd see him in hell before he'd do that."

YARDLAW heard the two men clump away in the darkness, the murmur of their voices ceasing as they neared the big cave. He straightened up, eased his tense muscles. So Whisky Jim and his gang had made another holdup, and were heading for the border? Well, that was none of his business, not yet. And someone they called "the Kid" was with them, an unwelcome guest, whose chances of survival among that gang were mighty slim. Spunky kid, at that. Had told Whisky Jim he would see him in hell rather than throw in with him. Yardlaw did not doubt but that kid was the man he was after. But he wanted to make sure. He slipped round to the east side of the corral and climbed over the short bars that sealed its narrow entrance.

The horses snorted, began to mill slowly. Yardlaw noticed that one of them, a rangy, high-headed animal when in action, moved much faster than the rest, and with a noticeably longer stride. He concluded that it was the fast-walking horse he had trailed to the bad-lands, and that Whisky Jim and not its owner would mount it in the morning. The animal was fresher than any of the others, and faster. And this meant that the kid would either be left afoot in the bad-lands, or shot down by the outlaw, who, Yardlaw knew, would not hesitate to kill a man for his horse. As for what might happen before morning came—that was a matter of chance.

Whisky Jim might or might not pick a quarrel with the kid and kill him before they left the cave. Yardlaw thought the kid had an even chance, until morning. More especially if he showed no signs of weakening. Whisky Jim, like many killers, was a coward, and consequently, treacherous. It would be like him to shoot the kid in the back, as the others started to get his horse. Of course, reasoned Yardlaw, it would be possible to steal up to the cave and surprise the gang. But that would mean a fight, with a poor light for shooting, and the chance of killing the kid, for in such an emergency all men would look alike to him. He decided to wait until daylight and then play his hand according to Whisky Jim's lead.

In years past, when a fugitive from justice himself, Yardlaw had frequently been called lucky. And later, as a deputy sheriff with a record for getting what he went after, he was called lucky. In reality, his success had always depended primarily upon a painstaking thoroughness of detail. His enemies said he didn't have brains enough to be afraid of anything. They were wrong. He was both courageous and careful. Often his quickest moves were the result of forethought and planning. He never went it blind. His name carried weight. He and his short-barreled rifle were highly respected even far beyond the limits of his own bailiwick. Yet he never counted upon his name as an asset when an arrest was to be made. He always went after his man as though they were strangers to each other, whether they were or not. He was considered cold-blooded, unfeeling, almost unhuman. Ed Applegate, however, knew him to be generous and just. And even Yardlaw's enemies had to admit that he was square.

HE HAD no quarrel with Whisky Jim or his crowd. He had no evidence that they had committed a crime. So long as they didn't interfere with him, they didn't count. He wanted the man who had killed Old Man Rankin. He wanted to get him without a fight, if possible. Under the circumstances he thought that would be impossible, so he prepared to shoot it out with them, meanwhile hoping the man he was after would come out of the battle unharmed.

Back-tracking down the slope, he worked round to the cave where he had left his horse, which he unhobbled. He laid a piece of rock on the ends of the reins. This, because he didn't want the animal to starve to death in case the battle went against him. The horse would stand for several hours, imagining he was tied. But finally, when hunger and thirst had made him restless, a slight jerk of his head would pull the reins from under the piece of rock, and he would be able to get to water, and eventually to grass.

Then Yardlaw smoked a cigarette, took

a drink from his canteen and started to pick his way along the base of the cliff toward the big cave. Once he stumbled and fell, holding his rifle high and taking the fall on his shoulder. He lay for a long time, listening. No sound came from the big cave, and no least flicker of firelight. Evidently the fuel gathered by the two men had been too wet to burn. Nearer the cave he rested, crouched behind a huge rock. Above him, some fifty or sixty yards up the slope, the mouth of the cave loomed black and silent. And now began his most difficult task, which was to crawl to the low stone wall that fronted the cave, and there keep awake until morning. Arrived at the wall, he settled himself with his back

against it, one knee drawn up, his short rifle across his knees. He became chilled, desperately cold and stiff, and the discomfort served to keep him awake. He laid his hat beside him, and, to keep himself occupied, counted his cartridges as he took them one at a time and laid them in his hat. Then he replaced each cartridge in his belt, counting, as before. Fifty, and five in the magazine and one in the chamber. Fifty-six.

Finally he became so cramped and stiff that he turned round, and, on his knees, worked a stone loose from the low wall, leaving a loop-hole, so that prone he could cover anyone within the cave and fire without exposing himself. This took him a long time, as he had to work carefully that he might not dislodge other stones and make a noise. While the outlaws had posted no guard and slept heavily, as their snoring attested, and unusual noise would probably waken them and create a suspicion that might keep one or more of them on the alert until daybreak.

The thin, steel-gray edge of dawn ran between the low hills and the ruffle of clouds in the eastern sky. Swiftly the darting light found a reflection in rain-washed rock and pool. The silver light became tinged with rose. The surface of rock and pool scintillated as though they mirrored fire. The radiance struck slanting into the mouth of the cave. Yardlaw saw one of the sleeping men awaken, sit up and begin to roll a cigarette. As he struck a match another of the men sat up. Yardlaw at once recognized Whisky Jim. The outlaw glanced round, rose and kicked one of the sleepers.

"Git goin'!" he said.

INSTANTLY the others were on their feet. Four of the five were obviously birds of a feather—stained and faded overalls, cotton shirts, dilapidated Stetsons. The fifth, young, smooth-faced, ruddy of cheek, wore town clothes although he had on the regulation boots and hat of a puncher. Yardlaw noticed that he had no gun or belt. Also that he stood apart from the others as Whisky Jim produced a bottle and told them each to take a snort before they hit the trail. Whisky Jim drank last and longest. He turned the bottle neck down, cursed and flung it out of the cave. Then he swung round and faced the young cowpuncher.

"You say you're headin' north? Well, git goin'. There's your saddle. I'm keepin' your gun. You won't need it."

"Mebbe not, after you've shot me in the back, when I pack my saddle out of here. I'm in no hurry."

"Hell, let the kid stay!" said one of the outlaws. "He won't do any damage afoot."

"I'm in trouble, and I'm heading north," said the younger man. "You got my gun and you'll take my horse. Ain't you man enough to give me a chance?"

"I'm givin' you a chance. Take your saddle and drift."

As he whom they called the Kid stooped to pick up his saddle and bridle, Yardlaw saw the other men draw back from Whisky Jim and Yardlaw knew that the outlaw meant to murder the Kid. The Kid swung up his saddle, shouldered it, and turned toward Whisky Jim.

"Well, so-long. I'm not telling anybody I met you fellows."

THE KID turned his back on the group at the mouth of the cave, and started out toward the stone corral. Yard-

law, prone, and with the sights of his short rifle on Whisky Jim's belt-buckle, paid no attention to the Kid, but watched the outlaw. Whisky Jim's hand dropped to his gun. One of the men said something which sounded like a protest. The outlaw's gun came up, swung down, and Yardlaw fired. Whisky Jim doubled up and sank to his knees. The soft-nosed slug from Yardlaw's rifle had torn through his stomach, and slanting upward had spread and cut his lungs to pieces, yet, even as the blood gushed from his mouth and nose the outlaw on his knees, fired twice at the spot where Yardlaw lay concealed.

Dropping his saddle, the Kid ran for the stone wall, made the short twenty yards in a flash and leapt over the breastwork. The outlaws had broken and run from the cave at the first shot. Because of the limitations of the loop-hole from which he had fired, Yardlaw could not see what had become of them. "Steady, there' or you're next," said Yardlaw, as the Kid began to crawl toward him.

"Just want to let you know that one of those birds is over there, behind that boulders, and he can get us, any time he wants to cut loose." The Kid gestured over his shoulder.

"Where are the other two?"

"Darned if I know. They just flew."

Yardlaw drew himself backward, worming his way toward the end of the wall. A bullet struck the wall at an angle and whined away along the slope. The Kid, flat on his stomach, glanced up at the silver streak on the wall. "I'm coming," he said as Yardlaw rolled in behind the end of the wall.

"I'd just as soon be shot up by a white man, as to let one of those coyotes get me."

Another shot whined along the wall, followed by the sharp snarl of a rifle. "He's got a rifle," said Yardlaw as the Kid squirmed round the end of the wall.

"Only two rifles in the outfit. The other one was Whisky Jim's. It's in the cave. The rest of 'em had six-guns."

"What made you run for this here wall?" queried Yardlaw.

"If I made for my horse, the other fellows would have got me. Were you after that bunch?"

"No. I was after you."

"Well," said the Kid, hesitating a moment, "it looks like you stopped Whisky Jim from plugging me, so I'll throw in with you."

"You're under arrest for killing Old Man Rankin. Get that straight."

"And you're Dick Yardlaw. Saw you over at Cochise, once. I—" The Kid, who was stretched out beside Yardlaw, jerked his hand back as though a hornet had stung him. Followed the whirr of a slug and the sharp crack of a rifle from down the hillside. Yardlaw's short gun swung round and he fired just over the Kid's head. Stunned and dazed, the Kid blinked at him, then dropped his head as Yardlaw fired again. One of the outlaws had worked from rock to rock down the slope until he could line his sights on the figures behind the end of the rock wall. Yardlaw had glimpsed a slight movement and had sent two shots so close to the end of the rock where the outlaw lay that the other drew back, unwilling to risk another shot from that position.

"That one sure creased me," said the Kid, rubbing his shoulder. "Wonder why they don't get to their horses and drift?"

"They won't. They're three to one, and they know it. They won't leave that pair of saddle-bags up there in the cave, with just one rifle to stand 'em off."

"How in hell did you know about those saddle-bags! You said you weren't after that bunch."

"Don't matter," said Yardlaw grimly. "They horned into my game. Now I figure to get 'em."

"Looks like they'd do the getting. They can wear us out."

"Mebbe so. You say there's another rifle in the cave?"

"Sure is. Whisky Jim's."

"You got sand enough to make a break and get it?"

The Kid turned his head sideways and

looked up at Yardlaw. "You mean that? Suppose I was to get careless and plug *you?*"

"You're talkin'. If you meant to plug me you wouldn't talk."

"Well, I can do something else beside talk," declared the Kid. "I like your style. Here goes nothin' with its hat off."

BEFORE Yardlaw could say another word, the Kid leapt to his feet, and dashed round the end of the wall toward the cave. This move surprised the watching outlaws, and the Kid was better than half way to the cave before they opened up on him. Their shots buzzed and whined from the rocks. Thin jets of dust spurted up here and there, but the Kid, apparently not hit, gained the entrance to the cave, scooped up the rifle as he ran, and without stopping, circled and dashed for the wall again. His exit was so sudden that again he surprised the outlaws. Two widely separated puffs of smoke enabled Yardlaw to locate the positions of the men who had nothing but six-guns. The man with the rifle, for some reason or other, had not fired. The Kid leaped the low wall and dropped, panting.

"Got her!" he said.

"And what's in the magazine, and nothin' more," said Yardlaw. "Didn't he have a belt on him?"

"Say, what do you want for a nickel? The whole show?"

"No. Just work back of me, and crawl over to that string of rocks higher up. If you make it, keep on crawlin' back till you get high enough to locate those birds down the slope. Then get busy."

"But say, pardner, suppose, just for luck, one of those coyotes was to get me. And suppose you got out of this later. Would you do me the favor of telling Miss Bessie Cullum and her dad that I rode onto Old Man Rankin branding a calf, and before I could say 'Good morning,' he started in to smoke me up and I just naturally pulled and let him have it? It won't cost you nothing to tell them."

"I'll let you tell 'em, when we get back," said Yardlaw.

"Well, I ain't shooting you in the back," declared the Kid. And he began to work his way toward the ridge of broken rock Yardlaw had indicated. Meanwhile, Yardlaw watched as much of the slope as he could cover from his concealment. The Kid, after gaining the ridge looked down on Yardlaw, and in spite of himself thought how easy it would be to loose a shot that would finish the man who had arrested him. And the Kid's face burned at the thought. He cursed himself heartily.

Then it occurred to him that it would be still easier to keep on working back, under cover, until he reached the shoulder of the butte and then, hidden by the wall, make for the eastern hills and leave the officer to fight it out alone. But he knew that that would be merely temporizing with Fate. Without hesitation he decided

to take his chances as a companion of Dick Yardlaw. A good fight, and out, clean, was a whole lot better than drifting with the black brand of coward and ingrate on his soul. Of course, if it were not for Bessie Cullum, he might drift. And now, strangely enough, he was as eager to return to his home and his friends and have it out, as he had been to run away. The dread of arrest had been a whole lot worse that the fact itself. And a few hours in the company of Whisky Jim's crowd had given him all he wanted of outlawry. A filthy, foul-mouthed gang—like buzzards gorging on a dead steer.

"Hey, pardner!" he cried softly. "What's the matter with your working back to where I am, and then both of us making a break for the east side. I'll stick."

"If you're gettin' nervous, curl your tail and run," said Yardlaw, turning his head.

"You go to hell!" called the Kid.

YARDLAW smiled grimly to himself. The Kid wasn't a murderer, that was plain. He had run into bad luck, surprised Rankin branding one of Cullum's calves, and the old man, probably mistaking him for one of Cullum's riders, had cut loose with his six-shooter. To Yardlaw there was nothing strange about that. Old Man Rankin had always had the reputation of

being mighty handy with a gun. And it was possible Rankin hadn't intended to kill the Kid, but simply to stampede him.

Yardlaw kept watching the huge, scattered rocks along the slope. Following his instructions, the Kid wormed his way back from the ridge to a position where he could overlook the slope from the base of the cliff to the floor of the desert. He could see the horses in the corral moving about restlessly. They wanted water. Slowly he searched the shadows of the boulders large enough to conceal a man. He concluded that the three outlaws had managed to draw away while Yardlaw and he had been talking. Yet they had not taken their horses, probably because the saddles were in the cave.

Finally he concentrated his gaze on the shadow of the rock behind which the man with the rifle had been concealed. He thought he could distinguish a boot and a few inches of overall. Carefully he took aim at the boot and fired. He saw the boot jerk out of sight.

"There's one of 'em behind that rock you were firing at," he called to Yardlaw. "The other two have faded."

"Get to where you can smoke him out," called back Yardlaw. "Are the horses there yet?"

"All of 'em."

AS HE cast about for a place higher up, the Kid wondered what had become of the two who had vanished. It did not occur to him that they had started to circle the butte on foot and approach Yardlaw from the rear. Yardlaw, however, surmised that that was their plan. He knew every foot of the immediate country, and knew about how long it would take them to make the circle of the butte. If such was their plan, the man behind the rock below held the key to the situation.

If they dislodged Yardlaw from his position, the man with the rifle could pick him off easily. On the other hand, Yardlaw commanded all approaches to the cave and he determined that the outlaws would have to put up a fast fight to get their saddles and the loot. A half hour passed. The Kid was unable to find a position from which he could get a shot at the hidden rifleman. Finally he told Yardlaw this, knowing that the man behind the rock could hear him.

"Keep him covered," called Yardlaw, "and don't take your eye off that rock no matter what shows up."

"That's my job," replied the Kid.

Another half-hour and the Kid grew thirsty. The sun was burning down through a thin, blue mist of evaporating water. A buzzard circled in the sky, so far from the earth that it looked like a black, floating speck of burned paper. The Kid sat with his back against the wall of the butte, his knee drawn up, his elbow resting on his knee to steady the rifle which he kept trained on the gray patch below. He wished something would happen. Anything was better than this burning monotony. He wondered what Yardlaw was made of to be able to stand it. And he wondered why they should both keep the lone rock covered so long. His eyes became dulled with gazing so intently upon one spot. He shifted his gaze, saw Yardlaw sitting on his heels, cowpuncher fashion, his short rifle held in both hands.

"As cold as a rattlesnake—and as quick," thought the Kid.

Again he turned his gaze to the bare face of the rock. Its shadow had grown shorter. A slight movement near the end of the wall where Yardlaw squatted, and the Kid saw that the deputy was taking off his belt, heavy with glittering cartridges.

"Plumb loco!" murmured the Kid. "He'll take off his shirt, next."

THE attack came without warning. Two men jumped round the shoulder of the cliff, not five yards from where the Kid sat, and began firing at Yardlaw. The Kid was startled, almost lost his nerve for an instant. Then he saw a movement near the edge of the gray patch of rock below, saw the muzzle of a rifle, a man's hand, his face, and, drawing fine, he fired. The first shot threw dust in the outlaw's face. His head jerked up. Again the Kid fired, then lowered his rifle.

Yardlaw was on his feet, his short gun held belt-high, and he was pumping shot after shot at the two men who were closing

in on him, firing as they came. The Kid was dazed by the crash of shots.

It was as though in a dream he saw one of the men stagger forward and fall, his gun clattering on the rocks. The other was close to Yardlaw, and was swinging down when the deputy jumped his rifle to his shoulder and blew the top of the outlaw's head off. The dying man spun round and sank in a heap. Yardlaw leaned against the wall. His gun lay at his feet. He seemed stunned, and stared grimly at the two men on the ground. Before the Kid reached him, Yardlaw stooped, and picking up his belt and rifle, began loading the magazine. The Kid knew by his actions that he was hit, and hit hard. He ran to the cave and returned with a canteen. Yardlaw was standing with his back against the low wall. His bronzed face had grown gray. He chewed his lower lip.

"I'll rest a minute, then we'll get the horses," he said.

"Where did they get you?" queried the Kid. He answered his own question as Yardlaw laid his rifle on the wall and took the canteen in his left hand. He drank, and poured water inside his shirt.

"You better sit down and let me bandage that hole in your chest," said the Kid. "You're bleeding plenty."

"We'll ride," muttered Yardlaw. But they did not ride for a long hour afterward. Yardlaw was stubborn, but as he grew weaker from shock and hemmorhage, he allowed the Kid to bandage the wound. A pistol ball had torn through his right breast and lodged under his shoulder blade. The Kid got him up to the cave, gave him more water to drink, and then went for the horses. First he rode Yardlaw's horse back to the cave, and leaving him, took his saddle and fetched up his own horse. He turned the others loose. They strung out, down toward the foot of the slope where there was water. Yardlaw was sitting up, his back against a saddle, when the Kid returned. He saw that the deputy was in no condition to ride, and argued with him. Told him he would go to Cullum's ranch and get help—a buckboard, which could wait for them out on the west road, and have Cullum send a man into town for a doctor. But Yardlaw wouldn't listen to the plan.

"I set out to get you, and you're goin' in with me," he said.

"Well, I'll stick," said the Kid. "But you won't make it far, in this heat."

"I reckon your horse can outwalk mine," said Yardlaw.

THE KID flushed. "You mean I would quit you and drift north?"

"You're talkin'," said Yardlaw. "Quit talkin' and roll me a smoke. My fingers are gettin' numb."

"One tough hombre!" exclaimed the Kid. "I like your style! Say, what are we going to do about them?" And the Kid gestured toward Whisky Jim's body.

"Nothin'. It's done."

"Well, I'm willing to quit this layout. They're kind of thick around here."

"I've seen 'em thicker," muttered Yardlaw. And from that time, until they reached the valley road along the western foothills, Yardlaw did not speak. He fought to stay in the saddle every foot of the way, the Kid riding knee to knee with him when the going permitted, and cheering him on as though Yardlaw were his best friend. About three that afternoon they reached the road, and shade. And there Yardlaw gave out. He would have fallen from his horse had not the Kid caught him. Yardlaw was bleeding from the mouth and nose. The Kid wiped away the blood and gave Yardlaw a drink from one of the canteens.

"I'm going to pull your saddle and bridle, hobble your horse and then fan it for Cullum's," stated the Kid. "I'll get a fresh horse and show 'em the way back here, pronto."

"Like hell you will!" murmured Yardlaw.

"Yes. I'll come a flamin', just like hell," said the Kid.

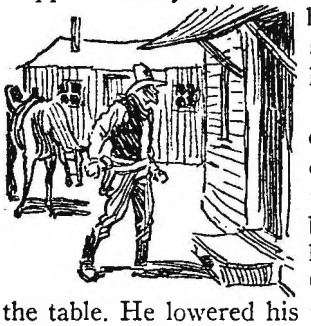
Making the wounded man as comfortable as he could, and leaving him water,

the Kid set out for Cullum's ranch. A walk, a trot, a lope, and back to a walk again, he wore down the miles, wondering whether or not he would find Yardlaw alive when he returned.

Again and again Yardlaw's gun-fight with the two outlaws flashed before his eyes. Never had he seen such a fight, and never would he see such another. A battle like that happened only once in a man's lifetime. Yardlaw, in the open, with his short rifle, against two fast guns. And the outlaws were gun-fighters, and no mistake! But they were fighting for loot. Yardlaw fought because they were interfering with his work. He had said as much. There was no glory in it for him, no money, no praise. Just the satisfaction of getting what he had gone after. And that meant seeing a job through to its conclusion. The Kid had a job before him, and he would see it through. He was Yardlaw's prisoner, and that went, whether Yardlaw lived or died. Perhaps he would be a fool to give himself up, but he was going to be that kind of a fool. Yardlaw had saved his life, and had trusted him. And it had been said of Yardlaw that he didn't trust anyone but Sheriff Applegate.

Moreover, it had been said that Yardlaw and Applegate had been enemies and had had a lively battle. The Kid wondered which of the two had been the victor. He couldn't believe that anyone had ever made Yardlaw take water.

At eight o'clock that evening the Kid stepped swiftly down from a played-out horse and walked stiffly up to Cullum's doorway.



Bessie Cullum came to the door, white-faced and breathless. Behind her, John Cullum sat by the table. He lowered his newspaper as he heard the Kid's voice.

"I'm back," said the Kid. "Dick Yardlaw rounded me up at Lone Butte. We tangled with a bunch of horse-thieves, and he's back there on the west road, and he's hit bad. Hook up the grays to the buckboard and send somebody to Rainbow for a doctor. I'll get a fresh mount and show you the way back."

"But, Bert—" cried Bess Cullum.

"It's all right," said the Kid. "I'll talk to your dad."

Cullum rose. "You say Yardlaw is hurt? Bess, put on the coffee pot and rustle some grub. I'll hook up the team, and send Jimmy in to town for Doc. Eldridge. You look wore down, Bert. You'd better—"

"I'm going back with you to get Dick Yardlaw," declared the Kid.

"About Old Man Rankin," said Cullum, as he stepped to the table and picked up his hat, "I'll see you through, if I have to sell every head of stock on the ranch."

Bessie Cullum protested against the Kid's going back with her father to get Yardlaw. One of the hands could go just as well. Or she would go. Or, she argued, Jimmy Bender could go and she would ride to town and fetch the doctor. But the Kid would not listen to her. "Then, why don't you ride back home to your folks?" she queried. "Bess," he began slowly, his face white with weariness and stress, "I'm liking you better than any woman that ever breathed, but I'm heading back to Yardlaw."

"And jail," said Bess, her mouth trembling.

"Mebbe so."

BESS CULLUM ran to him, threw her arms round his neck, implored him to think of her, and of the consequences if he were captured. The Kid took her hands, lowered them gently.

"Come on, Cullum," he said, and stalked out into the night.

Cullum called to him, told him he ought to eat something and drink some hot coffee. But the Kid would not come in. He stalked over to the bunkhouse and aroused Jimmy Bender and explained briefly why they needed a doctor. Then the Kid harnessed Cullum's team of grays and hitched them to the buckboard. Cullum came out with a cup of coffee and a thick beef sandwich. While the Kid ate, Cullum got blankets and a couple of pillows from the house.

When Jimmy Bender had saddled up, he led the horse over to the Kid.

"Here's a mount that can put you a long way south before sun-up," he told the Kid. "He's mine, but you're welcome to him."

"No farther than Rainbow—and you ride him," said the Kid.

DURING the long journey up the west road, the Kid told Cullum all that had happened since his meeting with Old Man Rankin in the arroyo. Cullum made no comment, until the Kid described Yardlaw's fight with the two outlaws. Then, "I never did like Dick Yardlaw," said Cullum, "and I guess I never will. But I sure respect him. But don't get the idea he saved your hide because he took a fancy to you. He don't fancy nobody."

"He as much as told me I wouldn't come back," declared the Kid.

"And he'll think you're a fool for comin' back. But I don't. You're right. And I reckon after Bess gets the right slant on it, she'll think so, too."

The horses had sagged to a walk. Cullum lifted them to a trot again. Finally the Kid lurched against Cullum, who told him to crawl back on the blankets and take a snooze. "It'll be a couple of hours more before we get opposite the butte," said Cullum. "Then I'll wake you."

The Kid was awakened by a sharp lurch of the buckboard as the team, scenting or seeing something unusual, left the road. Cullum pulled them up and swung back into the road. The Kid crawled back into the seat. "It's right here, close," he said.

And presently they discerned Yardlaw's hobbled horse in the night shadows. Cullum lighted the lantern and they found Yardlaw, who was in a stupor. They lifted him onto the buckboard, and the Kid sat beside him as Cullum drove toward the ranch.

SHERIFF ED APPLEGATE and the doctor had had breakfast and were sitting on the ranch-house veranda when the buckboard swung in through the gateway. Yardlaw was carried into the house and the doctor went to work. "It's a toss-up," he said, as he came from the room with Applegate. "He's lost a lot of blood. He'll have to stay here for some time. I wouldn't risk moving him."

"You mean he'll pull through?" said the Kid.

"You want him to?" asked Applegate.

"What do you suppose I went back with Cullum for?"

"Mebbe you promised Dick you would," said Applegate.

"That's my business."

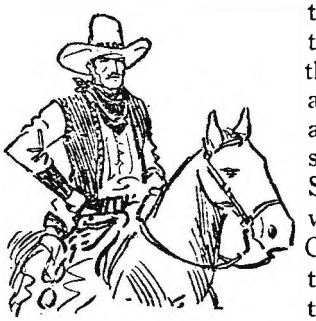
"Well, just cool down and come on outside. I want to talk to you," said the sheriff.

"Meaning I'm under arrest?"

"Yes. And you're going back to town with me. But we'll have that talk first."

The Kid was sullen. But finally he told his story, encouraged to frankness more by the sheriff's cool and not unfriendly manner than anything else. And when the Kid had concluded and had answered a few questions, Sheriff Applegate spoke.

"Look here, Bert—you're name is Bert, isn't it? Well, first off, I think you're telling a straight story. From what I hear, you've never been in trouble, up to this time. But you're in pretty deep, right now, and what you've done since the killing of Rankin is going to be looked at two ways by folks. Some will say, if you shot him in self-defense, why didn't you ride into town and say so? I know why you didn't, or I think I know. Then, there are some who will say you didn't kill Rankin—that Cullum killed him and you made your ride to Lone Butte so that it would look as though you did the job. And that, because you are his friend and Miss Bessie's friend. Such folks would like to see Cullum sent over the road, although they didn't have anything against Cullum.



"And suppose you confess you killed Rankin, a lot of folks won't believe it. They'll say you are trying to protect Cullum. What I'm getting at is, that any way you look at it, trying to make your getaway instead of riding right into town and telling what happened, was a bad move. And if Dick hadn't gone after you,

you'd kept on going, if Whisky Jim's bunch hadn't bumped you off. And the longer you'd have kept going the worse it would have been for you. I guess you understand that.

"Now, it isn't my business to take sides in this. My job is to get the man that killed Rankin. So I'm going to take you in, and you're going to stand trial, and it will be a case of circumstantial evidence. The verdict will depend on what you tell the jury, and what Dick Yardlaw tells them. And, of course, how you tell it.

"If the jury says you killed Rankin in self-defense, it will clear you and clear Cullum. And the best friend you'll have at the trial will be Dick—if he pulls through. Most folks hate him as much as I like him, and that's a lot. And when he tells in court how you played your hand, it will have more weight with a jury even than your own story. For everybody knows that Yardlaw plays no favorites.

"Now you can step in and talk to Miss Bessie and John, if you like. Then we'll ride to town. I'll be going right soon. I want to send three or four special deputies out to Lone Butte to pick up those saddle-bags and the guns—especially your gun that you forgot to take when you helped Dick over to the west road. Now you wouldn't have forgotten it if you'd been thinking of anything except taking care of Dick, would you?"

"I just naturally forgot it. It's a thirty-two-twenty, Bisley."

"And Cullum never owned anything but a forty-five. Mighty careless of you. Rankin wasn't hit by a forty-five."

"I guess there was money in those saddle-bags. Dick Yardlaw seemed to think so. After Dick got hit, I forgot all about that money."

"Mighty careless of you. But I notice you haven't said anything about my taking you into town."

The Kid looked away from Sheriff Applegate. "Going to put the irons on me?" he asked finally.

The sheriff's rather genial manner changed. "No," he replied brusquely, "but if you happen to change your mind and make one wrong move on the way in, I'll get you, as sure as God made little apples."

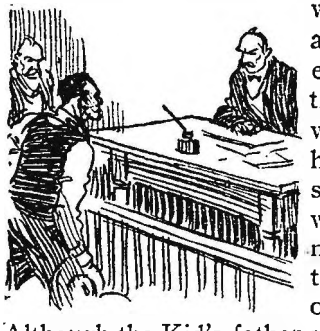
"Dick Yardlaw would have said that," declared the Kid.

"You're wrong," said Applegate. "Dick wouldn't have said a word. But he would have dropped you if you had started anything."

"I'll ride to town with you, regular," said the Kid.

SEVERAL weeks later Yardlaw was taken from Cullum's to the county hospital at Lester. His recovery was slow. But when, in October, he was discharged from the hospital, he gained strength rapidly. The local papers of Lester and Rainbow mentioned his recovery and referred briefly to his having cleaned up the Whisky Jim gang, giving him, however, cold credit for this. He was not popular. As for his capture of Bert Ransom, he received no credit whatever for that. Partisans declared that there was some collusion between Bert Ransom—or the Kid as he was known—and Yardlaw, but the papers were careful not to retail this gossip. Even though the party out of power wanted to get something on Sheriff Applegate and his deputy, the editors were exceedingly reticent about publishing town talk, or even their own opinion. "Wait until the trial," they said, and the disgruntled waited.

At the trial, early in November, the Kid surprised the community by confessing that he had killed Old Man Rankin. Cullum and Applegate were called to the witness stand and gave their evidence impartially. Yardlaw was called, and he told his grim story. The jury was out fifteen minutes, and returned a verdict of not guilty. Although the Kid's father and mother were in the court room, and Bessie Cullum and her mother, the Kid marched past them as they waited for him, and strode over to the sheriff's office, looking for Yardlaw. He found the deputy at Applegate's desk,



alone. He stepped up to Yardlaw and held out his hand. Yardlaw did not rise from the swivel chair. He nodded.

"Say, I want to thank you, for—for everything!" said the Kid.

"I don't see that I got any thanks comin'," said Yardlaw.

But the Kid's youth and gratitude carried him past this rebuff. "Didn't you save my hide when Whisky Jim was set to plug me in the back?"

"Well, you got the bird behind the rock, and he 'a' sure got me," said Yardlaw. "I guess that squares us."

"But the trial, and your evidence? You remembered every word you said and every word I said, and every little thing that happened."

"Well, that's business, ain't it?"

The Kid colored to the roots of his hair. Here was a rock that you couldn't strike a spark from.

"You're plumb froze up!" blurted the Kid. "You ought to go to hell and thaw out."

Dick Yardlaw smiled grimly. "That Bess Cullum is a fine girl. Too good for a young wolf like you," he drawled.

He rose, and to the Kid's surprise, thrust out his hand. The Kid gripped it. And Yardlaw's cold, gray eyes grew warm for an instant.

"You'll do to take along," he said. No greater compliment had he ever paid any man.

The Kid swung round and hastened out of the office. Across the street he met his family and Bess Cullum. His mother was weeping. Bess slipped her hand into his. John Cullum was saying something about knowing it would come out all right. The Kid saw them, heard them talking. But he was thinking of Yardlaw and Lone Butte. Both grim, solitary, rugged. A few feet out from a law stone wall, Yardlaw was standing, his short rifle held belt-high as he fired shot after shot at two men who had leaped from behind the shoulder of the butte, their guns chopping up and down as they came at him.

"What's the matter, Bert?" whispered Bessie Cullum.

"Nothing, Bess. Things seemed kind of queer, for a minute. That's a right pretty hat you're wearing. I never noticed it till just now."

LOUI THE WHICH

By E. C. LINCOLN

Author of "Orphan Dollars," etc.

THE STORY OF THE GREAT FEUD BETWEEN THE SPLIT DIAMOND AND THE CIRCLE SEVEN CATTLE OUTFITS, WHICH NEARLY WRECKED A COUNTY AND PROVED ONCE MORE THAT LIKE AN ARMY, A RANCH OUTFIT FIGHTS ON ITS STOMACH

IF THE Circle Seven had kept their sense of humor hog-tied till after the dance, and if the Split Diamond hadn't needed a cook pretty badly, and if Sam Aldrich, the Split Diamond's foreman, hadn't been in love with a girl over on Horse Creek—a girl who shall be nameless because she doesn't enter into the story much of any—then maybe nothing would have happened. But the Circle Seven didn't, and the Split Diamond did, and Sam Aldrich was. Got your spurs in her shoulders, cowboy? All right; let 'er buck.

The Ruby Gulch schoolhouse was packed to capacity that night, and the human overflow milled restlessly about the doorways, and the buggy sheds, and the hitch-rack where two long lines of saddle ponies stamped and squealed and kicked through the chilly May evening. Every living soul in the Basin was there, married folk and single folk, grandpas and grandmas, homesteaders and cowpunchers, half-breeds and full-bloods and white folk; and last, and by no means least of all, crying babies whose shrill complaints at being kept up so late drowned out the fiddle itself at times, as the Basin swayed through square dance and waltz.

Spring had been wet, that year. Until the last week the gumbo roads had been impassable for anything but saddle stock. So now, when the ladies of the Ruby Gulch district announced their annual box social and dance, the fun-famished Basin had turned out one hundred per cent, resolved to shake an active hoof till the sun shone bright next morning.

Yehhuh, box social. You know the game. Come early, and bring all the money you can scrape together. Dance till midnight, then auction off the boxes of lunch, beautiful generous boxes, enough for half a dozen hungry cowpunchers in each one, though they are only meant for a couple, the lady who put up the repast and the lucky man who bids in that box and wins the lady along with it as his supper partner. Fried chicken in those boxes, and cup custards, and mince pies with a kick in 'em, and feather-light rolls, and buffalo berry jelly, and—well, everything a rain-soaked waddie dreams about when he is riding herd on a wet night. Nobody is supposed to know who put up any particular box; but if you happen to have a girl, and she happens to be the right sort, she'll maybe slip you some little tip so you will know, all right, when the auctioneer calls for bids. Then you'll sell gun and saddle, if need be, and bid your head off as a matter of honor.

THE Ruby Gulch schoolhouse, shortly after twelve that night, was ringing with laughter and applause as box after box came up, to be sold to the highest bidder. The crowd was nervous with excitement, gay with color. In and out through the press wandered the single men, all those who had not yet bought their boxes, in search of possible clues; and gayest of the gay were the contingents from the Split Diamond and the Circle Seven, the two largest cattle outfits in the neighborhood.

Sam Aldrich, the Split Diamond's thirty-year-old foreman, hadn't felt so festive in ten years. His usually saturnine countenance was wreathed in smiles. Why shouldn't he feel good? That Horse Creek girl had come to the dance with him, and he reckoned on riding home with her afterwards. Also he reckoned on bidding in her box. She hadn't told him what it was, exactly, but she had hinted that it was tied up with a big pink ribbon, and he'd know it when the time came by something that was written on it.

Sam liked that girl a lot; and not the least of her attractions was the fact that she could cook. Sam knew that by experience. The Split Diamond, he reflected, certainly did need a good cook. Slim could wrangle beef on the hoof a whole lot better than he could on the table.

He grinned now when Perry Hanson, the fat, muscular little foreman of the rival outfit, nudged him in the ribs in passing.

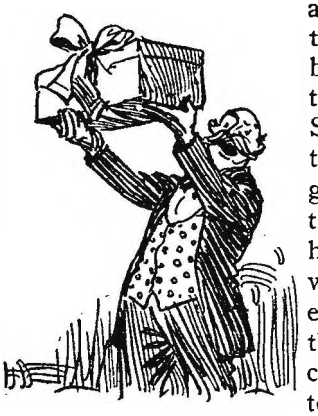
"I'm a-goin' make you step pretty soon, big boy," warned Perry with a wink.

"Come on, fat feller; let's help the ladies make a little money," Sam agreed.

Then the auctioneer, Joe Barret, raised aloft another box. The crowded room grew silent. Up on the platform Joe held the mysterious white package high above his head, that all might see plainly. It was an unusually large box, carefully wrapped, and tied twice with a broad pink ribbon.

Sam felt his heart skip a beat, then go pounding madly. He looked about him for the Horse Creek girl. She was nowhere in sight.

"This—here—box," began the auctioneer, "look at her gents! Ever see a



a purtier box 'n that? Pink ribbon 'n everythin.' An' big! Say, gents, they's enough grub in that box t' bog down the hungriest cow waddie that ever forked a thutty - dollar cayuse. An' listen!" he held up a warning hand. "They's somethin' printed on the paper. It says, 'This box was put up by the best cook in the Basin.'

"What d' yuh know, gents! Biggest box of the evenin', by the best cook in the Basin! What 'm I offered, gents?"

THERE was an instant of silence, then a burst of applause. Sam knew, now. He opened the bidding.

"Ten dollars!"

"Fifteen!"

"Twenty!"

"Twenty-two!"

"Twenty-five!"

Like the crackle of gunfire came the response. It was more competition than Sam had bargained for.

"Thirty-five!" shouted Perry Hanson, and winked at Sam.

"Fifty!" bellowed the Split Diamond's foreman promptly; but he wiped away the beads of perspiration which had sprung suddenly to his hot forehead.

He heard Shorty Beggs, his top hand, whispering in his ear. "Stay with him, Sam. Us fellers 'll back yuh right down t' our shirts. If them Circle Seven guys think they kin git that box away from us——"

So it wasn't just personal, then? Circle Seven against the Split Diamond. Sam hitched his belt and waded in.

Up and up went the bidding. The pikers dropped out. Only Sam and Perry, now; but still up. The crowd was breathless.

"Ninety!" shouted Sam.

"An' one!"

"One hundred!"

The foreman of the Circle Seven threw up his hands in apparent disgust. "I quit," he announced. "Go up an' git 'er, Sam."

"Let's see what she looks like, Sam."

"Where's the cook?"

But as Sam Aldrich, blushing, neared the platform, there was a swirl of commotion in the press before him. Bill Stevens and Al Burns, both of the Circle Seven, were assisting somebody to the stage.

And suddenly beside the auctioneer stood a diminutive Chinaman, hands tucked in his loose silk sleeves, cued head bobbing pleasantly as he grinned with embarrassment.

A yell of delight went up as the crowd caught the idea. Loui Fong, over at the Circle Seven, he sure was the best cook in the country, everybody knew that. Joke on Sam, all right. He'd ought to have known Perry was horsing him. Gosh! The hall rocked to the storm of merriment.

But for Sam the affair had gone beyond a joke. He saw Perry watching him narrowly. He saw "Dad" White, twenty years sheriff, climbing to a chair, his eyes worried.

Sam forced a laugh. "Yessuh, that's one on me," he confessed, as he worked his way to the platform. "Well, here goes for supper, anyways." He took the great box under his arm, offering the other to the little Chinaman. "C'm on, Loui. What you say you an' me hunt a quiet place to eat?"

Yes, Sam Aldrich took it like a good sport. But as the Split Diamond's foreman and his strange supper partner pushed their way toward the door Sam spoke a quiet word to each Split Diamond man whom he passed. It didn't help his temper any when the Horse Creek girl caught his eye and framed her red lips silently into the single word "stupid."

STILL, everybody said it was a swell joke. And after supper they danced some more; and Sam danced with the Horse Creek girl again, and everybody was happy.

Everybody, that is, except perhaps Loui Fong. Nobody missed him, or at least nobody said anything about it. Which was just as well, perhaps, because at that moment Loui Fong was pounding toward the Split Diamond on a high lope. He had never ridden a horse before, and the sport was painful. At Loui's right hand rode Shorty Beggs; and every time Loui started to slide out of the saddle on the off side Shorty's gun dug him gently; and at Loui's left hand rode Slim Taggert; and should Loui slip down in the saddle on the near side Slim's gun dug him gently.

"Y' see," explained Shorty, "the Split Diamond's done bought a cook' t' night, an' we aims t' c'llect. The Circle Seven can't slip nothin' over on us. Take it easy, Loui, an I shouldn't wonder would Sam raise yo' wages, sometime."

So Loui Fong grinned his celestial grin as best he could, and devoted himself to the endless struggle with that terrible contrivance they called a stock saddle.

Just when the Circle Seven first missed their prize cook nobody knows for certain. Report has it that not until Perry and his hungry punchers returned from the dance, well after sunrise, thinking, of course, that Loui had driven home with Chuck Baker in the spring wagon, and found the long table still empty of dishes and the stove cold in the kitchen, did any unpleasant suspicion cross their minds.

As for the Split Diamond, they gloat and rub their stomachs even yet, when they think of the breakfast Loui set before them that first morning. Apparently the Chinese cook, with the philosophy of his race, had decided to make the best of it. He received Sam's offer of ten a month more than Perry had been paying him with that same bland smile which might mean anything, giggled, "Aw'light, boss," and set to work in the strange kitchen as though he had cooked there all his life.

He was not in sight, though, when Perry Hanson from the Circle Seven came loping up to the ranch porch at ten that morning, jerked his steaming gray to its haunches in a shower of pebbles, and called Loui Fong's name in a voice that betokened anger.

A second call brought only Sam Aldrich himself, who strolled out from the kitchen doorway slowly shifting the toothpick in his mouth with evident relish.

"'Lo, Perry," he greeted cordially. "Did I hear you yellin' for somebody?"

The foreman of the Circle seven seemed actually to swell with emotion. His little eyes snapped. "You know durn well y' did," he accused. "A joke's a joke, but this one's gone too fer."

"Yeh?" agreed Sam. "That's what I thought when she'd jest hardly started, an'——"

"You—or some o' yo' gang—you shanghaied my cook—kidnapped him!"

"Nope," Sam answered slowly, "'twarn't e'sactly that. Some o' the boys, they kinder took Loui for a hawseback ride, an' then they thought they oughter invite him to breakfast 'cause 'twas so late. When I see him here I offers to raise his wages, would he work for the Split Diamond. Loui's a free man, ain't he?"

"He's the Circle Seven's cook, an' you stole him."

SAM straightened his shoulders, flicking the toothpick out onto the gravel. "All right, Perry, have it yo' own way. But if the Circle Seven wants him they better come an' get him—all of 'em. An' they better come a-shootin'. Right now Loui Fong belongs to the Split Diamond, an' don't you forgit it."

The Circle Seven's foreman received this announcement with a glare of defiance, too angry to trust his voice. His right hand inched toward the gun at his thigh. Then he nodded once, swung his horse about, and rode away without a word.

Of such minor beginnings do great events spring. Neither Sam nor Perry had really meant it, the shooting part; for if Sam had really believed that the Circle Seven would attempt to retake their cook by force, he certainly would have set a guard for the next twenty-four hours. As it was, the Split Diamond went to their blankets early in the evening, wearied by the festivities of the previous night. By ten o'clock every soul on the ranch was sound asleep.

Shortly after midnight dark shadows slipped through the wire fence to the north. The shadows crept about the ranch buildings silently. At last they drew together at the board shack which had been assigned to Loui Fong as his sleeping quarters. There was a tiny creaking sound like the forcing of a hasp, a pause, and shadows faded into the darkness of night again, their errand accomplished.

NOT a living thing on the Split Diamond, apparently, was aware of the midnight visit. Not a living thing, that is, except old Shep, the ranch collie, sleeping in his nest under the stable floor. To him in his dreams came a strange scent, faint, uncertain. Shep's nose twitched. The scent became stronger. Shep awoke, his ears erect. From far away came the slightest tang of wire, the noise a man's coat button might make as it catches on the second strand when he crawls through a fence. Shep's staccato challenge broke out on the quiet night.

Up at the ranch-house Sam Aldrich leaped from his bed, listening. Then he snatched on his trousers, stamped into his high boots, caught up his gun belt, and rushed forth into the cool, starlit darkness. Nothing there!

He stumbled across to Loui Fong's shack. The door hung open, button torn from the wood. Somewhere up on the bench he thought he heard the sound of galloping hoofs.

"Tumble out, Split Diamond! Ev-erybody out! The Circle Seven's got Loui Fong!"

Sam's stentorian roar of alarm brought every cowpuncher from his blankets, scalp tingling. Ropes whistled in the darkness of the corral; men cursed as they strained at cinches; horses grunted and kicked in the tumult. But seven minutes after Sam had given the alarm the Split Diamond sat mounted and ready, crowding against the corral gate.

"We got jest one chance," announced the foreman. "They can't go so awful fast with Loui, an' they'll keep the road. We'll cut wire and circle round. Mebbe we kin

give 'em a little entertainment yet."

So they streamed out through the gate, all ten of them, riding knee to knee in the darkness, shivering like fox terriers at the prospect of action. Straight across country they went, slipping down cut banks, scrambling up rim rock, racing with heads low over the sage-grown bench. When they struck fence the foreman opened it with his wire cutters, and they drove through.

Six miles, and the dark blot of the Circle Seven home ranch lay just ahead. No sound there in the cottonwoods; no light.

"We beat 'em to it!" gloated Sam. "C'm on, now; an' keep quiet."

He led them in among the ranch buildings, to call a halt in the shelter of the log stable which the home-coming Circle Seven outfit must pass to reach their corral.

"When I yell, you fellers hit 'em fer all you're worth. Don't make no difference if yo' hawses does nicker; they'll think it's their own loose stock. No shootin', though, less'n they start it. Swung yo' guns, an' sock 'em plenty!"

For an agonizing three minutes they waited, shivering in the darkness. Then they heard it, the sound of horses at a slow lope. The roll of many hoofs came nearer. A gate squeaked; then the slow music of straining leather; and a man's voice, elated, chuckled, "Well, we're here."

"Smash 'em, Split Diamond! Ride 'em, cowboy!"

The Split Diamond drove in its spurs with a yell, as Sam roared his battle cry.

THEY struck the unsuspecting Circle Seven riders with all the force of a Texas tornado, crashing through with shoulder and swinging gun. Before Sam, in the darkness, a white horse wheeled, rearing; then horse and rider went down before the shock of the impact. Something grazed his head, bruised his shoulder, half stunned him for the moment. He heard his own mount scream, felt him lash out in the press. Then he was lost in a melée of shouting men and crazed horses.

By and by he became aware of a shape crouched low in the saddle which rubbed incessantly against his left knee. He grasped the form by the neck, and he felt the scratch of a rough braid.

"I got Loui!" he shouted. "Smash 'em, Split Diamond. We got 'em licked!"

Ten seconds later the Split Diamond outfit was streaming toward home, a much battered Loui Fong in their midst. Next morning, barring a slight limp, Loui seemed little worse for wear. He cooked breakfast with the same cheerful grin as ever.

Four days later Slim Taggert, of the Split Diamond, and Bill Stevens, of the Circle Seven, happened to meet on the main street of the little cow town where both ranches bought their supplies and got their mail. It may have been accident, or it may not, that Slim licked his lips openly as he passed Bill on the sidewalk; and it may have been accident that Bill turned suddenly at just that moment. When a man turns suddenly almost anything may happen. Anyway, it was an even break.

Twenty minutes later Bill lay in a clean white bed at the county hospital, a blue-black hole completely through his right shouder. In the next bed at his left lay Slim; and the hole in his lower ribs was as like the hole in Bill's shoulder as one .44 slug is like another. The shooting had begun, and the war was on.

Rumor, never reliable but almost always with some foundation of fact, rumor had it that Perry Hanson himself had visited the Stockmen's Hardware and purchased two full cases of ammunition. What'd he want 'em for? How d' you suppose I know? Your guess is as good as mine. Business of cautious winks, and much protestation that it warn't no skin off the winker's nose, nohow.

The sheriff, Dad Waite, heard about that ammunition. His gray head worried harder than ever. Wasn't anything he could do yet, of course, but—— Bad medicine was in the making.

Days passed. Still the Circle Seven made no move. Sam Aldrich and the Split Diamond cowpunchers enjoyed such meals as they had never before known could be concocted by human hand. Loui Fong had settled to his new job with apparent resignationd. He seemed cheerful, for he

went about his work singing funny, squally, little cat songs high up in his nose. But his floppy clothes, the only clothes he would wear, were pretty much the worse for the experiences they had passed through, experiences in which Loui's person had in each case been the bone of contention. Sam worried about those clothes. It didn't seem as if they could hold decently together much longer.

Hardly by a hair did Loui's routine vary from day to day. Only, on the morning when he heard of the shooting in town, his slant eyes grew wide for a moment, and his grin became a shade less cheerful.

AFTER dinner, that afternoon, he shut himself up in his shack, closed all the windows, and waited patiently till the room had assumed a temperature of approximately 120 degrees, and a closeness in proportion. At this point his brain began to function properly. Next he opened a package of cheap American cigarettes, which he had drawn from the ranch store, and smoked half of them in rapid succession. Now the walls of the room were invisible, all breathable air had disappeared, and Loui's Oriental mind was functioning at full power.

He chewed the end of a match to the consistency of stiff brush, dipped it in a bottle of ink, and began to write a long letter, drawing carefully his beautiful strange symbols like over-developed cattle brands; angles, and ladders, and squares, and curves of grace. At times he paused, to rub his saddle muscles thoughtfully. When he was finished he sang a little cat song of content.

Next he went into the house and borrowed an envelope from Sam's desk. This he addressed, painfuly, in printed English, to a San Francisco street number. That night he turned it over to the Split Diamond foreman.

"Please-e Mis' Aldrich mail him t'mollow?"

Sam grinned his satisfaction. "I bet I know what's in it, Loui," he joked. "You ketch-um new clothes, huh? Don't blame you none; them pants o' yours is sure a sight. Here, you jest give me bill when they come, see? I make you present, 'cause you're sure one swell cook, Loui."

"You mail 'em?" persisted Loui.

"Yeap," promised Sam. "I'll sure see Shorty takes it when he goes in in the mornin'."

Four more days passed. Five. What was the Circle Seven planning? It worried Sam more than he would admit. He had no idea that Perry had given up his cook. Probably he was merely waiting his opportunity to strike, and when Perry struck again it would be in earnest. Sam kept one sentinel on duty by day, two by night. The rest of the men were held close to the corrals, ready for action. The work was suffering; spring roundup would soon be here. What could he write to the owners in the East?

On Saturday Loui Fong came to him with a new request; demand, rather. He wished to go to town once, to meet the morning train from the west.

Sam scratched his head. "I reckon you wanter get them new clothes, don't yuh? Why can't Shorty bring 'em out? Yuh see, I'm kinder scairt some o' them Circle Seven fellers might be in town, an'——"

But the little Chinaman was adamant. "No mleet tlain, no cook dlinner," he announced calmly. Sam knew he meant it.

"Well," he agreed at last, "I dunno as it'd do much harm. Shorty's goin' after the mail, anyways. I'll get Al to go with him. The two of 'em ought t' take care of any Circle Sevens as strays in. I'll get 'em t' take you in the buggy."

SO AN hour later Loui Fong was rolling toward town behind a team of half-broken colts. On his right sat Shorty. On his left sat Al. Sandwiched between them, the little Chinaman was hardly visible to the chance observer.

Before the Silver Dollar Shorty caught the attractive whiff of certain refreshing liquids. He looked at Al questioningly;

Al nodded. He drew the team to a walk, then swung them up to the hitch-rail between the tethered saddle ponies of earlier arrivals.

"Ten minutes before she gits in," he announced. "Jest time for a li'l drink. C'm on, Loui, an' have one on us."

They climbed out of the buggy, waited while Shorty hitched his team; then, made thirstier by the delay, the two young cowpunchers bolted in through the open door of the Silver Dollar. It was not at all to their credit that they failed, for the moment, to show proper courtesy to their guest, that they forgot him entirely, in fact. However, he entered on the run, hardly three seconds behind them; and he had a message, a most important message, to convey:

"Mis' Shorty! Mis' Al!" squealed Loui at the top of his shrill voice. "Clom kick! Hoss lun away!"

Together the Split Diamond punchers sprang for the entrance, brushing the excited cook from their path. It was true. Already a quarter of a mile distant on the road to the ranch, the buggy rolled and leaped in a cloud of dust as the bronc team tore homeward.

"I could 'a' swore I hitched them skates," lamented Shorty. "Quick, Al grab a hawse there, an' we'll get 'em 'fore they bust things up!"

From the hitch-rail they caught the first mounts that came handy, leaped into the saddles, and thundered off in pursuit of the runaway team with never a thought for Loui Fong, who watched the chase with the innocent smile of a delighted infant.

When they brought back the sweating broncos, fifteen minutes later, Number Twelve had come and gone. And because they felt considerably guilty it was with relief that they spied the Chinese cook pattering toward them from the direction of the station, a huge pasteboard box clasped in his arms. They hailed him with enthusiasm, for they had been worried.

"Whatever d' yuh reckon made them colts bust loose?" queried Al, for the sixth time, as they packed the cook in between them for the journey home.

Loui Fong grinned—wider than usual. "Mebbe—mebbe bee stling 'um," he suggested helpfully.

FOR a week Sheriff Waite had sat in his office, solemnly chewing the cud of his reflections. Somehow those two cases of ammunition were ever in his mind; and he reasoned very sensibly that Perry Hanson was planning no campaign of extermination against coyotes or badgers—not with shells selling at six cents each. Furthermore, that Chink cook was still in the hands of the Split Diamond crowd, who didn't propose to give him up. It would be Perry who would open hostilities, and with roundup coming on Perry was about due to act. It seemed to the sheriff that it was clearly his duty to do something, pronto, or have the nasty job of straightening out the mess when the straightening might be pretty difficult.

On Monday morning, bright and early, Sheriff Waite girded on his artillery, cinched up the long-legged sorrel kept for business trips only, and bade his deputy take care of the office till he returned. Then he departed on a slow jog trot, with his course set for the Circle Seven.

As he rode he watched the country, responding cheerfully to the warmth of spring, and over and over he pondered on words of warning which might convey to Perry Hanson the danger of his displeasure should any reckless move be made.

He found Perry at the corral; and he launched into his subject without preliminary.

"Perry, I hear tell as how you feliers is plannin' a raid on the Split Diamond fer t' git back that Chink cook o' yourn. Now I ain't warnin' yuh, I'm jest a-tellin' yuh. If——"

The stocky foreman of the Circle Seven broke into a sardonic laugh. "You brought

protested. "I ain't denyin' we was plannin' t' go after Loui, yes, an' go a-shootin', too. We was goin' last night. But if anybody starts anythin' now, why it won't be us fellers. Y' see, Loui, he come back of his own accord, an' sorter spoiled the fun. He's up there in the kitchen right now. Soapy Klein sent him out from town Saturday in one of his livery rigs. Near's I can make out, he gets sick o' workin' at the Split Diamond'n' gives 'em the slip. I raised him ten a month, like he asked, an' he's here for keeps. So I reckon you had yo' ride for nothin', sheriff."

The sheriff was puzzled. "That so? Guess my info'mation warn't quite up to date, then. Well—sorry t' trouble yuh, Perry. Looks like mebbe I'd better go see Sam."

"An' tell him we'll be right pleased to meet him, any time," suggested Perry.

The sheriff drew up his long-legged sorrel, started to speak, thought better of it, and rode on.

When he reached the Split Diamond an hour later he was a little surprised by the absence of excitement. It was the noon hour, now, and the odor of cooking food came tantalizingly from the Kitchen.

"Hullo, the house!" shouted the sheriff.

THERE was a scraping of chairs within. Sam Aldrich strolled out onto the porch, loosening his belt as he came.

"'Lo yourself, sheriff," he called. "Light down off'n that bonerack you're ridin', an come in t' dinner. Want you should see what a Chink can do in the way o' cookin' real grub."

The sheriff, already half out of the saddle at the mention of dinner, stopped short in the very act of dismounting. His eyes opened wide. His lean jaw sagged with bewilderment.

"W-what!" he gasped. "W-why, I jest come t' tell you fellers——"

"Wrong party," put in Sam. "If anybody starts anythin' round here it won't be us. Go talk t' the Circle Seven bunch. We got Loui, an' we plans right strong on keepin' him."

"But—but——" spluttered the sheriff, "I wus jest over t' see Perry, an' he said Loui wus gettin' dinner in his kitchen right then!"

Sam's eyes grew hard. "Perry was a-lyin' to yuh," he snapped. "See here."

He stepped back into the kitchen, to emerge a moment later with his diminutive Chinese cook clutched tightly by the arm. "There," he said, "there's what proves Perry ain't got the truth in him, nowheres."

The sheriff's jaw shut with a click. "I been a-ridin' over this country all mornin', tryin' to keep you fellers out o' trouble. I'm tired, an' I got a right good appetite; but they's some shenanagin goin' on here somewheres. I ain't restin' none whatever till I finds out what it is. Sam, you hitch up that buggy o' yourn, an' you an' me 'll take that Chink cook with us an' drive over t' the Circle Seven an' straighten this out!"

"But——"

"Ain't no 'buts' about it. An' leave yo' hardware to home; hear me?"

Sam did.

WHEN they drove in through the Circle Seven gate Sam noted the ominous fact that there was no one in sight, and the fact troubled him. He was morally certain that each window, wagon box, lumber pile, and brush heap, hid a Circle Seven retainer ready for action. It relieved him, somewhat, when Perry came out from the house at the sheriff's summons.

The stocky foreman of the Circle Seven greeted the occupants of the buggy noncommittally; but as he caught sight of Loui Fong squeezed in the middle of the seat the mask of politeness slipped from his face, and he halted with a cry of anger.

"Doggone it, sheriff, where'd yuh git that Chink? Jest one minute ago he was washin' dishes in the kitchen, an' now——"

There was a sudden scramble within the buggy, a shrill squeal of excitement from the kitchen door, and a blue-clad figure shot past him with the leap of a wild-cat.

A duet of squeals. On the porch of the Circle Seven two Chinamen, alike as two peas, leaped up and down and rubbed noses and embraced each other.

Speechless, the three cow-men watched the pair in awe struck silence. It was the sheriff who first regained his composure.

"*He's* Loui Fong, an' *he's* Loui Fong," he chuckled. "Sam, I'll jest bet a dollar y' kain't pick out your Loui Fong from the pair of 'em!"

And here one of the Loui Fongs took command of the situation, his voice sliding from squeak to guttural and back again in the sing-song tongue of the happy Oriental.

"China-bloy 'lite him budda letter in San F'lisco. Say, 'Melican-man play too rough. Say, clom kick! Say, ol' bones go back China all lit' piece, 'less clom kick. Say, meet at tlain-station. Say——"

"Which o' you two Chinks *is* Loui Fong?" This from Sam and Perry, shouted in unison.

"What th' dif'lence?" giggled the second of the Loui Fongs. "Both al-same good cook. Both all-same like work on cat' lanch!"

Sam looked at Perry. Perry looked at Sam. They grinned.

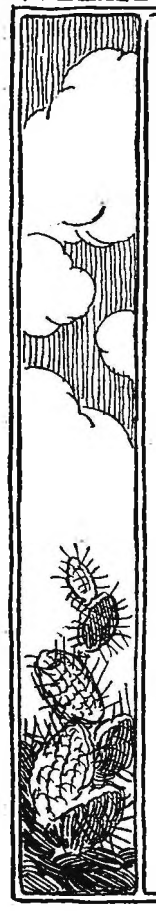
"Fer the love o' Mike!" said Perry.

"Kin yuh beat it!" said Sam.

Then they shook hands.

WHEN MAW TURNED THE STAMPEDE

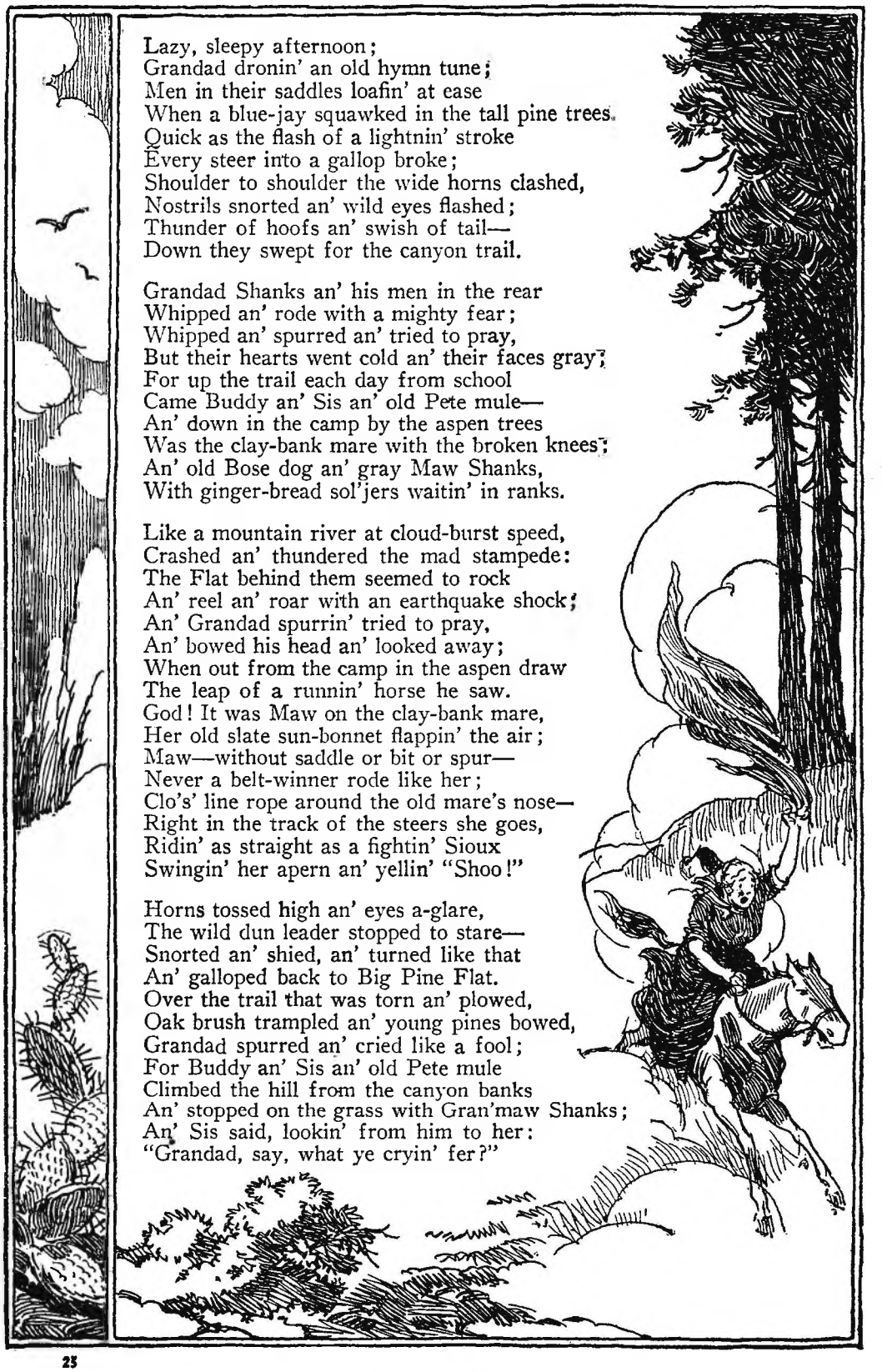
By Sharlot M. Hall



SEVEN Bars had combed the range
Bare as a mule with Texas mange;
A thousand beef steers rollin' fat
Pawed the dirt on Big Pine Flat:
Punchers guardin' 'em head an' tail,
Waitin' fer word to hit the trail—
San Carlos trail where the beef herds go
With porterhouse steak for Geronimo.

A thousand beef steers big an' fat—
Ready to run at the drop of a hat;
Each steer achin' to git the lead
An' start the herd on a mad stampede.
No man knows what a big steer thinks
When he shakes his head an' snorts and winks;
No man knows why he'll up an' run
At nothing, or anything under the sun.

Seven Bar trail boss, Grandad Shanks,
Old an' gray in a steer herd's pranks;
Learned their cussedness head an' tail,
Trailin' steers on the Chisholm Trail:
"Born in the saddle," he used to brag,
"An' cut my milk-teeth ridin' drag,
Growed my mustache pointin' the lead
Of Texas long-horns built for speed:
Watch 'em; watch 'em, boys"; he'd say—
"They'll run tomorrow if they don't today."



Lazy, sleepy afternoon;
Grandad dronin' an old hymn tune;
Men in their saddles loafin' at ease
When a blue-jay squawked in the tall pine trees.
Quick as the flash of a lightnin' stroke
Every steer into a gallop broke;
Shoulder to shoulder the wide horns clashed,
Nostrils snorted an' wild eyes flashed;
Thunder of hoofs an' swish of tail—
Down they swept for the canyon trail.

Grandad Shanks an' his men in the rear
Whipped an' rode with a mighty fear;
Whipped an' spurred an' tried to pray,
But their hearts went cold an' their faces gray;
For up the trail each day from school
Came Buddy an' Sis an' old Pete mule—
An' down in the camp by the aspen trees
Was the clay-bank mare with the broken knees;
An' old Bose dog an' gray Maw Shanks,
With ginger-bread sol'jers waitin' in ranks.

Like a mountain river at cloud-burst speed,
Crashed an' thundered the mad stampede:
The Flat behind them seemed to rock
An' reel an' roar with an earthquake shock;
An' Grandad spurrin' tried to pray,
An' bowed his head an' looked away;
When out from the camp in the aspen draw
The leap of a runnin' horse he saw.
God! It was Maw on the clay-bank mare,
Her old slate sun-bonnet flappin' the air;
Maw—without saddle or bit or spur—
Never a belt-winner rode like her;
Clo's' line rope around the old mare's nose—
Right in the track of the steers she goes,
Ridin' as straight as a fightin' Sioux
Swingin' her apern an' yellin' "Shoo!"

Horns tossed high an' eyes a-glare,
The wild dun leader stopped to stare—
Snorted an' shied, an' turned like that
An' galloped back to Big Pine Flat.
Over the trail that was torn an' plowed,
Oak brush trampled an' young pines bowed,
Grandad spurred an' cried like a fool;
For Buddy an' Sis an' old Pete mule
Climbed the hill from the canyon banks
An' stopped on the grass with Gran'maw Shanks;
An' Sis said, lookin' from him to her:
"Grandad, say, what ye cryin' fer?"

COLORADO

Adventure Rides the Overland Trail

By WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

Author of "Judge Colt," "The Desert's Price," etc.

Part III

Chapter XIX

THE THREE-CARD-MONTE MAN

YOUNG Collins intended to profit by Baldy's advice, even though he did not mean to follow it wholly. He had lived on the frontier long enough to know that dangers often vanish when confronted boldly. His best policy was to be wary, but to show no sign of being disturbed by Wilson's threat. Any evidence of weakness would be fatal.

Therefore without demur he accepted Beckwourth's suggestion, made later in the evening, that they stroll down and take in the night life of the towns together. Before they started the ex-Crow chief put a question to him pointblank.

"You loaded for bear, boy?"

Tom nodded.

That was all. No other reference was made to any possible peril, but Tom knew from it that the older man had heard of what had occurred in the restaurant. The youngster was grateful for the support offered by Beckwourth's presence. Not only was it an assurance that the breed believed him right; it meant a tacit but public endorsement of his cause. His friend would not interfere in any quarrel between him and Mose Wilson, but he would protect him against odds and would enforce fair play as far as possible. The boyish heart of the Missourian warmed to this fearless and unexpected backing. It was not likely that the bummers would attack him in the company of so redoubtable a fighter as Beckwourth. For though the latter was not of the bad man type his record was filled with daring adventure and hairbreadth escapes. His face expressed the spirit of the man. Its devil-may-care recklessness was not an invitation for any bully to impose upon him.

As they crossed the bridge into Denver the two men could look down Cherry Creek to the Platte. Hundreds of tents and covered wagons lined the banks of both streams. In the darkness these could not be seen, but scores of campfires gleamed among the cottonwoods. The population was a continuously shifting one. Many immigrants arrived each day, and many left for the diggings at the gold camps. Another wave of travel beat back from the hills. It was made up of dissatisfied miners who had sold their tools and superfluous provisions and were heading back for the States. The two men saun-

tered up F Street and along Larimer. They were in no hurry, and the life outside was as interesting as that inside the gambling halls and saloons which offered the only amusement in the town.

The thoroughfares surged with humanity. On either side of the road were one-story frame buildings devoted to games of chance. Some of these resorts were more pretentious, notably the Criterion and Denver Hall.

Into the latter Tom and his companion drifted. The dirt floor had been well sprinkled to keep down the dust from hundreds of moving feet. A long bar ran part way down one side of the room. This was lined with customers drinking and smoking. Hundreds of roughly dressed men moved to and fro, wandering from one gaming table to another. Others sat steadily in one place, intent on the game before them, whether it was faro, roulette, Mexican monte or poker.

One group stood in front of a man on a box behind a raised table. The patter of his sing-song monologue came to Tom, and he recognized the voice before he caught sight of Mose Wilson's bearded face.

"Here y'are, gents. This ace of hearts is the winning card. Watch it. Keep yore eye on it as I shuffle. Here it is now—now here. I lay all three cards face down on the table. Which one is it? Point it out the first time, an' I lose, you win. Right here it is, see. Now watch again." He shuffled the three cards once more. "I take no bets from paupers, children, or cripples. The ace of hearts, gents. A square game. The hand is quicker than the eye. Tha's my proposition. The ace of hearts, gents. If you pick it first time you win. Who'll go me twenty?"

A man shuffled forward. "Go you once," he growled.

Tom, on the outskirts of the group, stood on tiptoe. The man was Buck Comstock. He was, Tom guessed at once, a capper. Comstock slapped down a twenty dollar gold piece and the three-card-monte man covered it with another. The capper picked the ace, pocketed the money, and swaggered through the crowd boasting how easy it had been.

COLORADO

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

Something About the Story and an Outline of the First Chapters.

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE has written some of our most successful serials and his stories of the West had the faculty of always drawing the reader's sympathy toward one character who is making a hard fight in a country of hard fighters. "Judge Colt" and "The Desert's Price" both have enthusiastic followers among SHORT STORIES readers and we are more than glad to be printing Mr. Raine's new story, "Colorado." No tale of Western development has so much of romance, danger, and a fighting spirit as has that of the opening up of that territory which was later to emerge as the State of Colorado. It is into the turmoil and excitement of a journey over the Overland Trail to Colorado that you are introduced to young Tom Collins, bull-whacker for the present, and adventurer among those of whom it was said "the cowards never started and the weak died on the way."

Tom is pursuing his job of extra hand with a bull outfit creeping across the plains to Colorado when he draws upon himself the enmity of Mose Wilson and his gang of desperadoes who are operating along the Overland Trail. He recognizes in Mose Wilson one Mose Shipley, a medicine faker who had had care of Tom when he was a small boy and had cruelly abused and ill used him. Now Tom is big enough to hold his own notwithstanding the fact that Wilson is leader of a gang of outlaws who are not only raiding travelers on the Overland Trail but perpetrating all sorts of outrages in the different towns. Tom rescues from a hold-up by the Wilson gang two ladies who recognize him. One is Mary Gallup, a woman who had been very good to him in the old days, and the other her niece, Virginia Leeds, whom Tom had known as a child, but who has now grown to womanhood. Virginia was left an orphan many years before at the time Mose Wilson, then using the name Mose Shipley, was known to have murdered her father. Mary and Virginia are also befriended on their way to Denver by Lieutenant Manners of the United States army whose troop is stationed near by. Tom is suspected by them for his championship of Deer Eyes, a young Indian whom he rescued from Mose Wilson, but cannot explain his connection with the girl.

Much is told of life in those stirring days in Denver and the characters in the story are all interested in a duel scheduled to take place there.

"My friend, you won. You're a stranger to me, but no hard feelings. Next time I'll win—maybe. Who else wants easy money?" asked Wilson.

HE CONTINUED to deal the cards. One interested tenderfoot edged a little closer. The dealer marked him for his prey without ever letting his eyes rest on him. The patter ran on without ceasing.

Tom watched the tenderfoot and could almost read his thoughts. This game looks simple. The dealer has, evidently without noticing it, turned up slightly one corner of the ace. Now is the time to bet. The tenderfoot tosses out a gold piece. He points to the card with the raised corner, but alas, it is not the ace! Puzzled and chagrined, he retreats, aware that somehow he had been tricked and that the hand is quicker than the eye.

"The ace, gents. The ace is the card. This is a game of fun, skill, an' amusement. Here it is now. Point the ace out the first time an'——"

The card sharp's fluent patter broke off abruptly. His cold shifting eyes, on the lookout for victims, had fallen upon and recognized Tom. A kind of muscular spasm contorted his face. As the light winks out at the snuffing of a candle, so the wheedling heartiness went out of this man's countenance. So swift was the change that those about the table caught it instantly, red danger in the savage glare, and found immediate business elsewhere. It was a crowd used to unexpected fireworks, and it fanned away from the three-card-monte man's vicinity.

Tom remained, and Beckwourth; also Buck Comstock and Wilson's handy man Dave.

"I know who you are," Wilson roared. "You're the bummer who tried to rob me of my squaw-girl. Where is she? Tell me that before I let daylight through you. Spit it out."

Beckwourth spoke. "Just a moment, Mr. Wilson. No, I wouldn't reach for that gun yet. Deer Eyes is a relative of my wife. She's at my house and she's going to stay there until she wants to leave."

The card sharp had descended heavily from the rostrum. He stood at the edge of it, pulled up short by the challenge of the older man. He knew Beckwourth. Everybody in this country knew him. In addition to unflinching courage, the breed had a wide influence that ramified both among the tribes and the old settlers. It was possible for him to make existence exceedingly hazardous for one who like Wilson was often on the dodge. The outlaw's hiding places were known to a few trappers and to some Indians, the very people over whom Beckwourth had a prestige that was in some cases almost authority.

"I got no quarrel with you, Mr. Beckwourth," he said huskily. "In regards to Deer Eyes, I'll talk that over with you. I'll do fair an' square by the girl. If this—this bummer hadn't set her against me I——"

"Call me by my name," the young man cut in. "Tom Collins, who used to be your slave when you lived back East, the child you beat an' tortured like the cruel hound you are."

WILSON'S eyes grew wide with astonishment. "So that's who you are, a common street rat I picked up outa the muck of an Arkansas swamp."

"That's who I am. No, keep your hands in front of you, onless you want me to drill holes in you. An' listen. You were a cowardly murderer then. You're a horse thief an' a killer now. If you ever had a chance you'd shoot me as I would a rattler. I know that. All right. I'll be there when you try. Which will it be—now or later?"

One of the proprietors came hurriedly forward. "Gentlemen—gentlemen, not here. If you please. Not in this house. Go outside first. There's all outdoors to settle yore troubles in. Not here please."

"Tomorrow," roared Wilson. "I'll get you tomorrow sure as you're a foot high."

He backed away, snarling, as far as the bar, then turned and strode out of the house.

"Get out right away—out the back door. Go to yore room—an' stay there till morning. He'll get you in the back if he can," Beckwourth told young Collins. "An' if you go out tomorrow, go lookin' for trouble."

Tom thanked his friend with a look and turned to follow his advice. He passed into the starry night, took a quick look around, then started on the run for the bridge. His blankets he had left outside Wootten's store. He intended to sleep out on the prairie, far away from any chance of a visitation from Wilson or his friends.

Half an hour later he unrolled his blankets beneath the stars, a mile from any house.

CHAPTER XX

ACCORDING T' THE CODE

IT WOULD be easy to set in too high a light the lawlessness of the young town Denver and the gold diggings in general. The great majority of the citizens were law-abiding. Many were of the best class, steady, reliable, indomitably courageous. To say that they were of pioneer quality tells the story.

But the settlers were young and high spirited. The restraints of church and home had been entirely lifted. There were few women in the community to temper its wildness. Therefore liberty had become license.

Add to this that a gold rush always brings on the surface of the wave a scum of humanity eager to make the most of the unsettled conditions, to prey upon the immigrants before the forces of law and order became crystalized. These were a small minority, but at first they were an active clamant group, claiming dominance by the sheer impudence of effrontery. Denver had its Chucaluck Todd, its Buckskin Bill, its Tom Clemo, its Jim Gordon, its William Young, and its Charley Harrison.

Most of these were killers, and all of them were thugs or ruffians. To this fraternity of vice Mose Wilson's gang of outlaws had come as a temporary accession.

During the late months of '59 and the spring and summer of '60 the lawless element rode roughshod, held in check only by sporadic uprisings of the people. Judge Colt ruled. Judge Lynch was soon to take command for a brief time. Judge Law would assert itself as soon as the Anglo-Saxon instinct for law and order crystalized. For a brief time the vicious ran rampant, in Denver as in most other frontier communities, but the period of their reign was short.

The duel belonged to another day and another age, but it still persisted in spite of general disapproval. In San Francisco, this very year, almost within a month, Senator Broderick had been killed by David S. Terry, Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court. The bitter feeling between the advocates and opponents of slavery was responsible for more of these personal encounters than any other single cause. Usually the hot blooded Southerner was the aggressor.

Along with Goldrick and Baldy Brown young Collins walked out to the duelling ground next afternoon. A steady stream of people was moving in the same direction. Some were on foot, some on horseback or on mules, and a few drove. It was considered a gala affair, second only to a hanging in public interest. Tom was not so absorbed by the proceedings, however, as to forget for a moment that his life had been threatened and might at any moment be attempted. He kept a weather eye open for his enemies and easily located them. Mose Wilson's gang and the toughs of the town were gathered together in a ribald group not approached by sedate and respectable citizens. They did a good deal of loud talking and laughing. Wilson was conspicuous among them on account of his height and long hair. In every gesture and movement he swaggered.

McClure* and his second Moore, accompanied by a doctor and several friends, drove up and dismounted. A minute or two later Whitsill and his second Lawrence, together with a small group of well wishers, reached the dueling grounds. Moore and Lawrence at once approached each other, saluted formally, and with-

* McClure survived and became a year later the first postmaster of "Denver City." Moore was elected first mayor December 19, 1859.

drew a short distance to settle the details of the meeting.

The seconds tossed a coin for choice of position, though there was no advantage to either party, since neither faced the declining sun. The weapon's were Colt's revolvers, navy size, at ten paces. One shot only was to be allowed, and it was to be fired between the words "One—two—three," to be pronounced by one of the seconds.

Moore loaded the weapons and paced the distance, placing each principal. Lawrence stood back from the line of fire, half way between the two.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" he asked.

Tom's mouth went dry. He had seen men killed, but he had never seen life attempted in this deliberate formal fashion. He found himself moistening his lips.

"Ready," Whitsill answered, and a moment later McClure echoed the word. Both spoke in voices clear and firm.

"One—two—three."

Simultaneously the revolvers sounded. Both combatants held their positions for a moment, then McClure recoiled a step.

"I'm hit," he said in a low voice to his second.

MOORE started toward him. "Baldy?" he asked.

McClure's left hand covered his right groin. "Here, Jack," he said and his body swayed.

His second caught the wounded man and lowered him to the ground. An examination showed that the ball had traveled obliquely downward.

Men crowded forward, as they always do when someone has been hurt. Among these were Tom's companions. He himself stood back on the outskirts of the crowd. His attention was focused on his enemy. He did not want to be taken at disadvantage.

A man left the group of bummers and moved toward Tom. The man was Musgrove. He handed Tom a sealed envelope.

"For me?" the young man asked, accepting it with reluctance.

"For you an' no other, young feller." Musgrove grinned expansively, derisively.

Tom ripped open the envelope and read what was written on the paper within. His eyes opened with sheer astonishment. It was a challenge to a duel, and it was signed "Doctor Moses Wilson."

"His honer as a Southern Gentleman having been impuned and his reputation malisously attacked, Doctor Wilson gives the lie to the foul aspersions of the low scoundrel caling himself Thomas Collins and hereby challenges him to mortal combat on the field of honer, same to ocur at earliest possible convenience on the dueling grounds of Denver City, Jefferson Territory."*

Even though there was no mistaking the meaning, Tom could hardly believe that the words on the paper meant what they seemed to say.

CHAPTER XXI

WITH SAWED-OFF SHOTGUNS

THE whole thing was ridiculous of course. Tom realized that. It was absurd to talk of a formal duel between Wilson and himself. Neither of them belonged to the class which indulged in the luxury of duels. Even the ill-spelled cartel itself was an incongruity.

Yet Tom did not at once reject the idea as impossible. He stood looking at the paper, pretending to be reading it, while his mind dealt with the fragmentary thoughts which raced through his brain. What were the motives which had prompted the sending of the challenge? What was the best way to treat it? To whom should he go for advice?

Musgrove's grin still persisted when Tom looked up. The man's expression was not unfriendly, though sarcastic, as has been mentioned.

"You'll have to excuse me not being in a plug hat an' Prince Albert," he apologized. "I didn't know in time Mose was gonna set up for a gentleman."

It occurred to Tom to try out this man. He might get from him some hint of his principal's state of mind. His feeling was

* Originally Colorado was a part of Kansas Territory. As the Pike's Peak country took on local pride the settlers demanded separation from Kansas. Many names were suggested for the new district, but the one accepted was Jefferson Territory. When Congress voted on the new territory the name was changed to Colorado.

that Musgrove was an individual and not merely an echo of Wilson. He very likely had his own point of view.

"Kinda sudden," Tom said. "I don't hardly know what to do with this." The young man grinned wryly. "I'm a bull-whacker, an' I ain't fought any duels yet. But I'm geftin' up in the world, as you might say."

Musgrove gave him advice, not in his official capacity. "Boy, light out. Sudden an' onannounced. Mose aims to kill you. He's a dead shot with a six-shooter."

"Yes," agreed the youngster. "I know. I used to be his target. He can shoot the spots out of a card at thirty yards. Where can I find you this afternoon, Mr. Musgrove?"

"You don' want to find me. What you need to find is a fast horse. Course it's none of my business. I'm handin' you advice free gratis, an' Mose wouldn't thank me for it."

"Much obliged, Mr. Musgrove. It's right friendly of you. I know he aims to kill me—if he can. But I don't reckon I'll run away. I don' know yet what I'll do. But s'pose I want to see you tomorrow mornin'——?"

"Why, I'll be at the Criterion after eleven o'clock. I don't rise right early."

"Maybe I'll send a friend to see you."

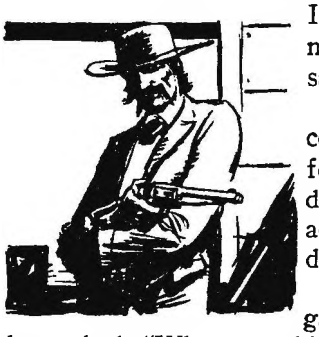
"Better send yore friend for a horse, boy. But don't say I told you. I don't want any run-in with Mose. What am I to tell him, anyhow?"

"Tell him he'll hear from me tomorrow morning."

"Hmp! Write him from California Gulch then an' say 'good-by.' I'm tellin' you he's more dangerous to you than a whole passel of Kiowas on the warpath."

After Musgrove had gone Tom walked back to town with Baldy Brown and Goldrick. His mind was busy with the problem before him, so that he took little part in the conversation. They had reached the first houses before he made any contribution to the talk.

"It's the first duel I ever did see, an' I reckon it will be the last. I can understand why fellows go gunnin' for each other when they have a rumpus. That's one thing. But to go out an' stand up to be plugged at in cold blood—well, I'm glad



I'm no gentleman," Baldy said.

Mr. Goldrick contributed information. "The duel is an anachronism. It dates——"

"Help! Help!" gasped Baldy, then asked, "What you think, Slim?"

"I think it's a plumb fool business, this dueling, but as for you never seeing another, Baldy, why I ain't so darned sure. Tomorrow, or maybe the next day——"

The old stage driver stopped abruptly. "What's eatin' you, boy?"

Tom handed him the letter received from Wilson. "I can be a gentleman any time I've a mind to," he said with a rueful smile.

Baldy read, his eyes popping out. "Lordy, if this don't beat the Dutch! What in Texas has got into that scalawag anyhow?"

"We wants to be in the fashion, don't you reckon?" Tom passed the challenge to Goldrick to read.

"What you aim to do, boy?" Baldy wanted to know.

"Can't tell yet. Gonna talk it over with Beckwourth first."

"It would be plain murder," Baldy blurted out. "The fellow is a dead shot. I've seen him give exhibitions. There ain't his beat, or his equal for that matter, in this whole Western country. He aims to kill you in such a way so as he can get shet of consequences."

"That's his idea," admitted Tom.

Goldrick handed the letter back. "I'd appeal to the law, have him bound over to keep the peace."

"Law, shucks!" Baldy derided. "There's no law west of the river yet, except what is made to suit the occasion. This slick bummer figures he can duck a people's court this way. So he can, too, if you walk into his trap, Slim."

"I reckon you're right, Baldy."

"Question is, what to do then. If you called a meetin' of yore friends maybe you

could run the bummer outa town."

"An' maybe I couldn't. All the gang from the Criterion would line up with him. No, sir, I haven't got that many friends."

"Would it be any use to explain to him that you're not looking for trouble of any sort and that you do not mean him any harm?" asked Goldrick.

"It would set him rarin' to get at Slim. That's the kind Mose likes to pick on. No, sir. The boy has got to fight or light out, onless Wilson can be driven out, an' I don't reckon he can."

FROM of old Tom understood the mind of his enemy. He knew it with the instinctive certainty that had come of a child's fears. One of the outstanding traits of the man was vanity. He liked to sun himself before an admiring world. He liked to pose and strut and domineer. The fellow was no longer a second-class dandy. He had sloughed his fine clothes with his graceful figure. He was a heavy slovenly ruffian. But vanity never dies. It feeds on such food as it can get. Here was an opportunity both to seize the spotlight on the stage and to satisfy without much risk his hatred. He could kill, and he could kill with eclat. To shoot his man in a duel would give the fellow standing, at least in his own mind. Of course the whole thing was absurd. Tom saw that. But it was exactly the sort of cock-a-doodle-doo affair that would appeal to Wilson.

Tom carried his problem to Beckwourth, who got the point without undue explanation.

"It's the very high-falutin' sort of thing he'd do," agreed Beckwourth. "But you'll have to fool him. It would be suicide to fight a duel with him."

"On his terms," agreed Tom.

"Meanin' what?"

"Everybody has been talkin' about duels the last day or two. I've been gettin' educated. The fellow challenged has the choice of weapons."

"Not thinkin' about carving him with a bowie, are you?"

"Not much," agreed Tom. He weighed less than one hundred thirty pounds and his enemy around two hundred.

"What then?"

"How about a sawed-off shotgun loaded with buckshot at twenty yards?"

Beckwourth looked at him with amazement. He wanted to be sure first that the young fellow was not joking. Certainly Collins looked serious enough.

"Why, you would both be plumb full of lead right sudden. It would sure finish Mr. Mose Wilson. But how about Slim Collins?"

"Me, too—*if we fought.*"

"Talkin' about fightin', weren't you? An' him, too."

"I've known this Wilson, or Shipley, or whatever he calls himself ever since I was *so* high." Tom measured a short distance from the ground with his hand. "Many a time he has whaled me till I couldn't stand. He's a bully—wants the best of it every time. I don't say he's exactly a coward, but I do say he won't go through to a finish when it's a case of cold nerve."

Sparks of excitement danced in Beckwourth's reckless eyes. "Boy, if you've got the sand in yore craw to play yore hand thataway——"

"I've got to have the sand. There's no other way out—none that I'll take. I can't bushwhack him from ambush, an' I'll not run away."

"Public sentiment would back you if you shot him without warning. He threatened yore life publicly. A dozen men heard him. He's a bad citizen, known to be a bummer and a killer, thought to be a horse thief. There would be no complaint from decent folks if you bumped him off."

"I can't do it, not by layin' for him. No use talkin'."

"An' you ain't willin' to slide out?"

"No. A fellow can't run away an' hold up his head afterward, can he?"

"Some could. Depends on circumstances."

"Well, I couldn't."

"Nothing left but to fight him then. Don't fool yoreself, Slim." The man's keen shining eyes probed into his young friend. "If you make this bluff about the sawed-off shotguns, an' he calls it—what then?"

"I'd go through. I'd have to."

"You mean you'd stand up there before

him, twenty yards away, an' let that bummer fill you full of slugs?"

"I WOULDN'T run away," Tom answered doggedly. "He's aimin' to kill me anyhow. Musgrove told me so, an' I knew it before. Why not fix it so he hasn't any advantage over me? But I don't figure it will come to that. He knows he can shoot a Colt's quicker an' straighter than most anybody else in the world. If he can badger me into standin' up before him with one he'd have just what he wants. But with a sawed-off shotgun I'm just as good as he is. Chances are I'd get him, even if he did get me. Well, he'll never risk it."

"How do you know he wouldn't?"

"I saw him licked in a fight once by a man not so strong as he is an' not so good with his maulers. The other man outgamed him. I saw Slade back him down at Julesburg the other day."

"You're not Joe Slade," Beckwourth said dryly.

This remark seemed to Tom a valid criticism that summed up all the objections to the proposed plan. It was certain that if Slade had offered to meet Wilson with

such a deadly weapon as the sawed-off shotgun at short range the outlaw would have stayed not on the order of his running. But Slade was Slade, whereas Tom was only a gangling boy. In spite of his prophecy to Beckwourth that Wilson would run out of such an encounter Tom knew that the man might try to outbluff his bluff. He had flung out this challenge boldly and no doubt was strutting among his admirers like a turkey cock. To have to turn tail before a mere boy would be a terrible humiliation. He might prefer to bully his way through in the hope that his adversary would weaken.

"No, I'm not Slade," Tom admitted. "Well, if you don't like my plan let's hear one that is better. I'm not onreasonable."

Beckwourth laughed, clapping his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Son, I haven't said I don't like it. But we have to look at it from all sides. You figure he won't go through with it. Maybeso you're right. I'd bet myself he'd sneak away, if he knew you like I do. But we got to remember he's already declared himself. He's come out in the open. If he backs down now it would be a plain crawl, an' he knows his crowd would figure it that way. He'll pretty near have to stick."

"He won't stick if he thinks there's a good chance of gettin' killed. I know him," Tom insisted.

There was that in Tom's plan that seized mightily on the imagination of his friend. It was daring to the verge of foolhardiness. It was filled with unexpected drama. It had a neat sardonic irony that made for grim amusement, since the builder of the trap would find himself caught in its teeth.

"Let 'er go, boy. I'm with you every step of the trail. Once when I was with the Crows I saw a case kinda similar. One big buck all het up with his own importance challenged a quiet small fellow whose squaw he wanted. The one he challenged jumped at it. Sure, he said, with tomahawks, their left wrists lashed together. The big buck couldn't face it. He cut his own throat the night before they were to meet."

"Wilson won't do that."

"How do you go at this business then?"

"I reckon I send him a letter sayin' I will an' naming weapons. Wouldn't that be the way of it?"

"I reckon."

"I'll get Professor Goldrick to write the letter for me. He knows the proper words to use. Then I'll get someone to take the letter."

"Good 'nough. How would Baldy Brown do to take the letter? He'd do it for you, I think."

"I'll try him," Tom said.

He was disappointed. It had been in his mind to ask Beckwourth himself to act as his second, but perhaps the scout did not want to embroil himself with this group of desperate men. As for Baldy, Tom was not at all sure he would act for him. The stage driver would think it all foolishness.

He had passed his dictum on the custom of dueling and announced that he was no gentleman and therefore not bound by idiotic traditions about honor. Tom did not know who else he could get.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CURLY WOLF HOWLS

GOLDRICK declared himself at once. He disapproved of dueling *in toto,* he said, and preferred to have nothing to do with the matter. If there was any other way in which he could serve, why of course——

"I don't know where this Toto place is," Tom replied, "but I'm against it in Denver an' every other place. Also, I'd sure like to have nothing to do with it. If you'll persuade the other fellow to give up the idee it will certainly be welcome news to me. But I'm drug into this, an' I got to go through. All I'm askin' of you, Professor, is to help me fix up a letter to this bummer. If you'd kinda ride herd on the grammar an' rope the long words for me I expect I'd make out."

"I misunderstood you, sir. My impression was that you desired me to act as your second. I would have conscientious objections to that. But I am very much at your service if I can assist in editing a letter."

Goldrick did more than edit the letter. He drafted it, rewrote it, and finally copied it in neat chirography. Before he turned it over to Tom he discharged himself of all responsibility for consequences.

"I am merely your secretary for the nonce, Mr. Collins," he explained. "I do not indorse anything written here. You understand that?"

Tom thanked him and put the letter in his pocket. Now that he had it written he did not know how to get it delivered. Uncle Dick Wootten would not act for him. He was sure of that. The old scout would think the whole thing foolishness. Baldy would probably feel the same. Tom thought of Lieutenant Manners. He would know all about such things probably, but very likely his official position would keep him from mixing in the thing, even if he wanted to do so. And Tom knew that Manners would feel it beneath him to involve himself in a quarrel between a bummer and a bullwhacker.

He was in a quandary. Uncertain how to proceed, he stood in front of the Apollo Theater and read the poster for the evening's performance. He noted that M'lle Hayden and her Sisters would appear for the entertainment of the city in their World-Renowned Acts which had been applauded by Presidents and Princes. While still reading the announcement a voice hailed him. Joseph A. Slade was coming down the street.

"So you got here all right, young fellow," Slade said, shaking hands with him. "I wasn't so sure about you. That bummer Wilson and his friends took out after you. They were headed for here, I was told."

"They're here," Tom said.

"You haven't met him yet then?"

"Yes, I've met him. If you'd like to hear the story, sir, we could go into one of these gin-mills while I tell it. I'd rather not stand around too much in the open."

THEY dropped into the nearest saloon and took seats. Slade ordered rum. Tom took a cigar and put it in his pocket. The young fellow told the story of what had occurred since leaving Julesburg. He passed over to Slade the challenge and his answer.

The man-tamer read the letters and gave a yelp of delight. "Hell an' high water! You've sure turned the screws on this fourflusher, boy."

"Do you think so? He may figure I'm no more dangerous than a brush rabbit."

"Not Mose Wilson. He'll bluff maybe, but he'll not go through. He'll crawfish first. The fellow is yellow."

"I hope so," Tom admitted frankly. "I'd hate to have him turn me into a lead mine."

"Who is going to be your second?" asked Slade.

"I don't know. Unless Baldy will."

"Boy, I'll take your letter. We'll let this bummer know you've got friends."

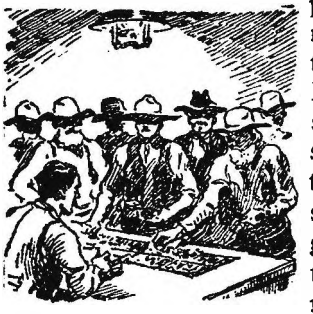
Tom's face lit. "Will you, Mr. Slade? O' course I'd rather have you than anyone else. If you take my answer Wilson will

figure maybe there's something to it."

"I'll send word to Uncle Dick's store how it works out. Likely I won't have any news till tomorrow."

Young Collins watched him go. Slade walked with the firm easy tread of a man perfectly sure of himself. He radiated confidence. Tom knew that he was in good hands. His cause had found the buttress of a strong support. Of all the men he knew he would have chosen Joseph A. Slade first to back him.

Slade drifted over to the Criterion. The



place was beginning to fill after the midday lull. Presently the stage company superintendent caught sight of Musgrove bucking the tiger. He ranged up beside him.

"Mr. Musgrove, I'd like to see you a moment," he said.

Musgrove cashed in his chips and walked out of the hall with the other. He wondered what Slade wanted with him. Perhaps the superintendent was going to call him to account for the attack upon him at the cabin. It might be in Slade's mind to shoot him down outside. Public opinion would sustain him. It would be like the man to exact summary vengeance that way.

The outlaw walked warily. He was quick on the draw himself, and he did not intend to be caught napping.

Slade handed him the letter Goldrick had written for Tom.

The eyes of the other man opened. This was a horse of quite a different color. Not so good for Wilson if Slade was declaring himself in and calling for cards.

"I told that boy to light out," Musgrove said lamely.

"Yes, he told me," the superintendent said dryly. "You take that letter to Wilson. I'll be here this evening after supper."

Musgrove was due for a still greater surprise when Wilson opened the envelope and read what was written within. The face of the challenger registered blank amazement.

"Goddlemighty!" he rasped out. "Did that kid give you this?"

Musgrove handed him another pleasant surprise package. "No, Slade gave it to me."

"Slade! Is he here?"

"Y'betcha! Backin' this kid, looks like." Musgrove gave the information with distinct pleasure. He was fed up with Mose Wilson's overbearing ways and he did not object to seeing someone take a fall out of him.

Wilson thrust the letter into the hands of Musgrove. "Read it. This is some of Joe Slade's work. Think I don't know? He put the kid up to it. Bluffin.' That's what they are. I'll show 'em up."

"Sawed-off shotguns loaded with buckshot," Musgrove repeated. "Why, there won't either of you have a chance. At twenty yards, this says. Lordy! You'll both be deader than stuck shotes."

"Tryin' to scare me," roared the other. "Think I don't know? That kid! Why, I've whopped him fifty times till he couldn't hardly yelp any more. Him try to make me crawfish? No, sir. It's Joe Slade. That's who it is. I'll show him."

Musgrove's face was properly noncommittal. "Aimin' to call his bluff, are you?"

"Goddlemighty! I'll show him. He can't run on me, not Joe Slade or anyone like him. As fer that slabsided kid, I'll sure make him climb a tree."

"Meanin' that you'll fight him the way he says?" Musgrove asked, chewing his tobacco cud equably.

"Fight him any way, any time, any place. You're damn' whistlin'. I'll show Joe Slade he don't know sic' 'em if he thinks he can get biggity with Mose Wilson. I'm the best gunman ever come into these diggings. If Slade thinks because he's a killer he has got me buffaloed you can grab it from me that he's a million miles wrong. Me, I'm some killer, too, an' by gar! where I am at I am chief. I take the middle of the road, you understand."

"You are sure a curly wolf," agreed Musgrove, not batting an eye. "Now about this boy's proposition——"

Mose was working himself up into a furious rage. He broke into the other's sentence, scarcely aware that he was talking. It was necessary for him to blow off steam or explode.

"Slade never seen the day he could scare me, I'll have you know. I've sent better men than him to Boot Hill, an' I will again. From where I come from there was bad men, plenty of 'em, but none like Mose Wilson. Me, I'll go through from hell to breakfast. That's me. Tryin' to scare me with a scatter gun. Hmp! Gimme any kind of gun, don't care what it is, I'm the quickest on the draw an' the straightest shooter this side of the river. Or the other side either, by gum."

"Then you aim to take up Collins' proposition?"

"Don't push on the reins, Musgrove. I'll not stand for it. Yes, sir, I'm a killer from 'way back."

MUSGROVE leaned against the bar, his back to it and his heel hooked on the rail. Since Wilson had "a running off at the mouth," as his auditor put it to himself, he supposed there was nothing to do but listen. He took a shot at a crack in the door, using tobacco juice as ammunition, and scored a hundred per cent. hit. A fragment of conversation between two miners drifted to him. "Came to me straight. Three of 'em cleaned up a quart of gold in a week at California Gulch, mostly in small nuggets." Meanwhile Wilson continued to rave.

Presently Musgrove straightened himself and stretched. "Well, I'll drift. Good show at the Apollo. Thought I'd take it in tonight. See you later."

Wilson stretched out a hand to stop him. The killer was beside himself with rage, and he was almost ready to turn it loose on the handiest victim. "Damn you, Texas man, you stay where you're at till I'm through. Understand? You come out here inside a Conestaga, an' claim you're a bad man. Bad, hell!"

Musgrove looked at him out of chill hard eyes. "Don't get on the prod with me, Mose. I'm makin' no claims I can't back, but you're sure right when you call me a Texas man."

He spoke quietly enough, but voice and manner pulled Wilson up short. He was going too far, and he knew it. To quarrel with Musgrove was no part of his program.

He struggled with his temper till he had control of his voice. "'S all right. I don't aim to rile you. Not none. In regards to this Collins bird, why I'll fight him any damn' way he likes. Y'betcha! He's bluffin', fur as that goes, an' he'll never go through."

"Maybeso. But he don't have the earmarks of a fourflusher, not to me."

"He'll go to sleep in smoke, sure as Pike' Peak ain't a hole in the ground. Fix up a letter tellin' him I'll be there two ways from the ace tomorrow mornin'. Say about twelve."

They got pen, ink and paper from the bartender and sat down at a table to compose a reply. It was a laborious business, for neither of them was used to writing. Eventually the note was finished and Musgrove set out to deliver it.

MOSE WILSON sat morosely at the table where they had been working. He ordered gin, and after that more gin. Left alone, with no chance to talk himself into an angry assurance, he began to have qualms about what he had done. This kid Collins—he was nothing, nothing at all. So Wilson assured himself. Probably by morning he would be hard to find. When he read the message Musgrove handed him he would be frightened to death. Still—Slade was back of him. Maybe the fool boy would stick it out. The ruffian began to think it was bad medicine he had prepared. Naturally, as a means of getting Dutch courage, he continued to drink more gin.

CHAPTER XXIII

TOM TELLS A STORY

ALREADY rumors were flying over Denver and Auraria that a second duel was fomenting. Before Tom had received Wilson's reply more than half an hour the story was all over the place. Lieutenant Manners picked it up on the street and carried it to the cabin where Mrs. Gallup and her niece were living.

"It's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of," he said by way of comment. "People of that class of life have no business aping their betters by fighting duels; and in the second place to fight with such weapons is barbarous and savage."

Mary Gallup was interested in the fact rather than his opinion of it.

"Is it about this Indian girl they are fighting, the one Tom brought with him to Denver?" she asked.

"I suppose so. There is something else back of it, too. The young fellow accused him of a murder committed years ago. It may be true enough. Wilson is a bad hombre."

"But isn't it awf'ly dangerous, to fight that way, so close, with these scatter guns?" Virginia asked, much frightened and distressed. "Won't one of them be killed maybe?"

"It's suicide," Manners answered. "Nothing less. If I had any authority I would arrest them both."

"If you only would," the girl begged, white to the lips.

"I can't. It's outside my province."

"This Wilson! He's such a notorious bad man," Mrs. Gallup pleaded.

"Yes. He's a stage robber and horse-thief. We feel sure of that. To my own knowledge he has killed one man, one of his own associates, a fellow called Orton. Very likely he has killed others. It's a bad business. But one can't touch pitch without being defiled. If young Collins had gone straight he would not have become involved with the ruffian."

"I don't care what Tom has done. He mustn't do this foolish awful thing. It's a sin against God. I won't stand by and see it done, not if I can prevent it."

"I don't like it myself," Manners admitted. "The fellow is a dead shot, they say. This Wilson, I mean. The boy ought never to have let the man fasten a quarrel on him. It was his own fault of course. Even then he had a chance to run away, I hear. But he's stubborn. He wouldn't go. I don't know what he's thinking of to choose shotguns loaded with buckshot. But there's nothing we can do about it."

"Oh, there must be. We can't—we can't —" Virginia's voice broke. She felt her heart a wash of tears.

For there had come to her the vision of a young man, almost a boy, riding up the hill to what looked like almost certain death. It had been the most recklessly gallant action she had ever seen. This boy had saved them. It did not matter what he had done since. That hour could not be blotted out. Then, capriciously, her memory jumped the years. She was a child, her hand in that of a small boy. They were trudging up a long hill to the house of her aunt. And the boy, she knew it with the sure instinct of an infant, was her devoted slave as well as her squire.

"Of course there is something to be done," Mary Gallup said decisively. "If you will bring Tom here and let me talk with him——"

Manners was annoyed, both at himself and at them. He should not have told them of the impending duel. He blamed himself for not realizing that they might take it this way. The trouble was that he did not understand them well enough to know in advance what their reactions would be to any given situation. He had been brought up among women who never moved out of their tradition of what was proper for a lady. They were sweet and gentle and helpless outside of their own sphere. Independence was not becoming. To interfere in the quarrels of men was unthinkable.

"I don't believe that would be best," he said, a little stiffly.

"I'm sure it would," Virginia broke in. "If Aunt Mary could talk with him he would not do it."

Manners held himself straight as a ramrod. He resented their point of view. Why should he mix in an affair between a ruffianly thief and a squawman who prodded oxen for a living? He was an officer and a gentleman, and it was not fitting that he put himself on an equality with them. Randolph Manners was very young and not yet any too sure of himself. Moreover,

this was no occasion for women, friends of his, to let themselves become involved in. This last he tried to explain. It was not a lady's business. People would talk. Better not give tongues a chance to wag.

Mary Gallup brushed through his halting verbiage.

"I don't know what you mean about a lady's place, Lieutenant. Should a woman not try to save the life of a poor boy if she can—especially when he has fought for her, when she has known him from a child?"

MANNERS had an uncomfortable sense of having been put unjustly in the wrong. It did not change his opinion, but he was not acute enough in dialectics to sustain his position. He attempted, failed, and surrendered not very gracefully.

"I'll see this Collins for you," he said coldly.

"Please do," Mrs. Gallup said, without appearing to notice his disapproval. "And don't send him here, please. He might not come. Bring him yourself." She gave him the warm friendly smile with which wise women disarm hostility.

The lieutenant departed on his mission. He made a tour of the gambling houses, inquiring for Collins as he did so. The young man was not well known, though his name was on everybody's lips. Uncle Dick Wootten said he had seen him with Joseph Slade half an hour earlier. They had talked of going to the show at the Apollo.

They were in the Criterion at the time. As Manners started to leave the house he caught sight of Mose Wilson and his shadow, Dave. They were sitting at a small table in one corner of the room. Mose had his back to the wall. He always sat in such a position that nobody could get at him from the rear. A man could not live as he did without making enemies, he realized. Dave was sitting opposite him and appeared to be talking confidentially. His voice was low and his head close.

Lieutenant Manners found Tom at the Apollo with Slade. He had paid his dollar, but he was not enjoying the entertainment.

The theater was the upper story of a popular saloon, and the noise of clinking glasses, of clicking billiard balls, of sudden raucous voices lifted to those above. The body of the theater held about three hundred and fifty seats. The room had no ceiling and was not plastered. A dozen guttering candles illuminated the place.

Manners made his way down the aisle and beckoned to Tom. Young Collins joined him, and the officer delivered his message. Tom's heart was lifted by it. He called Slade out and told him he was wanted.

"I think I'd better go," Tom said to his companion.

Slade laid a hand on his shoulder affectionately. "Always go when the ladies call you, my boy," he said with a smile.

As the two walked up the dusty street Tom diffidently asked the lieutenant a question.

"Do you know what they want with me, sir?"

"I was asked to bring you. I was not entrusted with any other message," the officer replied.

Tom felt a stiffness of manner, almost an unfriendliness, in this handsome young West Pointer. He was sorry, because he admired Lieutenant Manners extremely. The officer had all the charm of personality that come of education and the aristocratic inheritance. The young plainsman did not resent his aloofness. Tom was modest. He had not, he felt, very much to offer. As far as he was educated at all, it had been in the school of hard knocks. His parents he had never known. It had been Mose Wilson's policy, while he was a little fellow, to impress upon him that he was poor white trash. Therefore he was unduly humble as to his merits. It was Lieutenant Manners' privilege, if he chose, to be distant.

Not that Tom admitted social inferiority in his dealings with men. He stood on his own feet. He was a Westerner, and

he looked every man in the eye, acknowledging none as master. None the less he acknowledged the right of Manners to choose his own friends. He was no fool. He recognized that family and education and training make a difference. Naturally Virginia and her aunt would like this young soldier who wore so lightly the air of a young prince.

WHAT Mrs. Gallup wanted with him he could not guess. As he waited with Manners outside the house, after the lieutenant had knocked, he felt both shy and doubtful. Tom had been nervous and worried ever since Musgrove had brought Mose Wilson's acceptance of the terms he had proposed. While sitting with Slade at the theatre his imagination had been busy with what the morrow was to bring forth. Had he, like Wilson, dug a trap for himself from which he could not escape? Would he never see another sunset? After tomorrow would he never again be able to walk up and down in a glad world as other men could do? He understood now how a condemned murderer must feel while waiting for the execution.

But the summons from Mary Gallup had for the moment driven the fears from his heart. They would come trooping back later, but just now he had something else to think of.

Mrs. Gallup opened the door to let them in. Tom was struck again, as he had always been, by the vitality of the gracious life which overflowed in her. It was not only that she was tall, full-bosomed, and sweetfaced; rather that her generous spirit expressed itself through a glowing personality. Behind her Tom saw Virginia standing, slender and girlish, in her eyes a fear-filled expression he was always to remember.

"Will you sit down, Tom?" Mrs. Gallup said after she had shaken hands.

The boy sat on the edge of a chair, awkwardly, turning in his hands the dusty hat he had declined to relinquish to his hostess.

The cabin was a poor enough place, much like the others in the camp. It consisted of a single room about twelve feet square. The cracks between the logs were chinked with wood and were plastered with mud. There were three chairs of elders fresh from the hills, the bark still on them. The table was of the same material. The flat roof of baked mud upon a layer of split logs and grass was the ceiling. Wooden hinges held the door, and the floor was of hard smooth earth. The mattress lay on slats stretched between two logs.

Nevertheless somehow the wretched place had an air comfort, even of home. Coffee sacks covered the ground. A buffalo robe hung on one wall. Antimacassars draped the backs of the chairs. The quilt on the bed was neat and scrupulously clean. Some books were in evidence, and two or three daguerreotypes. One of these was a photograph of Abner Leeds.

Mary Gallup bridged the first few moments with casual talk. Her manner ignored any difference that had come between them. He was, it implied, a friend whom they had not met for a few days.

"We're having right nice weather," Tom said by way of contributing to the conversation. "No, ma'am, I ain't quit the company, not exactly. I kinda got a leave of absence from Mr. Slade, on private business." The young man blushed, remembering the nature of the business and the attitude of this lady to it.

She did not accept the opening he had inadvertently given. Instead, she went straight to the thing in her mind.

"Tom, what's this we hear about you and that man Wilson?" she asked. "I mean about a duel."

He was not wholly unprepared for this, but the attack left him fumbling for words. "Why, ma'am, I—I been drug into it, as you might say. I'm right peaceable. But this fellow, why he——"

"Yes, I understand that. He's bad, a ruffian and a killer. But, dear boy, isn't that the very reason why you should avoid him?"

Her voice had a note of tenderness that brought a lump into the young fellow's throat. A little friendliness from her went a long way with him.

"Honest, Mrs. Gallup, I tried to duck this Wilson. I ain't lookin' for trouble. It got pushed on me, looks like."

She did not discuss that. "Now, Tom,

look at this right. Duelling is a sin against God. You know that. There's a commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.' Can you go up to the throne of God perhaps with blood on your hands—blood shed wilfully?"

"It won't be wilful, ma'am. If you'll show me any decent way to get outa this thing, why I'll sure thank you. I've looked every which way, an' I can't find it."

"You can slip out of town and disappear for a time, can't you?"

"Yes," breathed Virginia, almost in a whisper.

THE boy looked at her, hopelessly, then again at her aunt. More than anything in the world he wanted to do what they wished. But he could not do that. He could not run away under fire. If he did he would be forever a marked man, one who had a stain on his name that never could be wiped out.

Beads of perspiration stood on Tom's forehead. "I can't do that. No man could. It has gone too far." He appealed to Manners. "You tell 'em I can't back out now."

Mrs. Gallup forestalled the officer's answer. She rose and put a hand on the shoulder of the harrassed youth. "Two wrongs do not make a right, Tom. Don't you see that? Even if you have been led into an error you must not persist in it out of false pride. It would be too awful."

"I don't want to go on," he said miserably. "I'm where I got to, Lieutenant Manners will tell you so."

"Nobody can tell me that it is right to murder, or to throw away the life God has given you. You mustn't do it." She was pleading with him as though he had been her own son.

"I can't run away now. I just can't," he defended. "If I could I would. Honest, I would."

Mary held her hand out toward Virginia. The girl came forward and took it. "We're asking you, Tom—the two oldest friends you have in the world—not to do this horrible thing. If you can't run away, make an apology to the man. Just a formal one. He would be forced to accept it."

"Do you know who he is?" Tom blurted out.

"It doesn't matter. I'm told you accused him of killing someone. No doubt he did it. Never mind. Be brave enough to retract what you said, no matter what anyone may say."

"This Wilson—he's Mose Shipley."

MRS. GALLUP was for the moment struck dumb. The possibility of this had never occurred to her.

"He knows who I am," the young fellow went on. "He aims to kill me. One of his gang told me so himself. He'd shoot me down from behind, the way he did—the way he has done other men. I figured this might bluff him out. At heart he's not game. I know that."

"But—how do you know he's Shipley. Are you sure?" she asked. The shock had made her faint and sick.

"Sure. I knew it before I even saw him. Heard him singin' that ol' Susannah song. You know the one, ma'am. They used to

sing it in St. Joe during the first rush. 'I'm off for California.' He usta sing that a lot in the old days. I've heard him manys the time when he came home drunk at night. Right away I knew his voice again. This was down at Julesburg the other day. When he an' his friends came outa the station I saw it was Shipley all right."

"You're quite sure?"

"Certain sure. He's raised a beard, an' he's heavier an' slouchier. But he's Mose Shipley. I'd know him anywheres."

"Did he know you?"

Tom could see that both aunt and niece were shaken by this news. It was as though some dreadful thing that had been buried had risen out of the past to confront them.

"No, ma'am. I was only a li'l fellow when he saw me last."

"But he knows now who you are?"

"I told him last night."

"You quarreled before that then? Please tell me all about it. Was it over this Indian girl?"

"She comes into it." Tom took a mental hurdle, and plunged. "I reckon I better tell you the whole story."

"I wish you would," Mrs. Gallup said.

Lieutenant Manners stirred uneasily. He made as though to intervene, but Virginia looked at him and in that look he found a bar to action.

Tom told his story, beginning at the time he first saw Deer Eyes. He sketched in a few sentences his encounter with Orton, the care with which she had nursed, her need of a friend. He recounted the facts about her and Wilson, or Shipley.

"She was scared of him—horribly scared of him. No use her going to her father. I don't reckon he could have stopped it anyhow. No use takin' it up with Mr. Slade. She was only a squaw anyhow. So she came to me. Well, ma'am, what could I do? She'd nursed me, like I said."

Virginia's starry eyes met his. She was listening breathlessly. Mary Gallup, too, was intent on every word he uttered.

"I slipped outa Julesburg with her an' brought her to Denver. She's stayin' with Lady Beckwourth," the boy continued. "But it wasn't about her this Wilson, or Shipley, had the first rumpus with me yesterday." He went on to tell the incident of the professor and the silk hat, playing down his own part in it, and the later developments that had led to the present situation.

Mrs. Gallup gave him both hands. Her eyes were warm with that eager friendly good will for which there is no other name than love.

"I might have known it," she cried, all in a glow. "If I had had faith enough. Forgive me, Tom."

Virginia said nothing, but her eyes were little wells of tears. She had found again the friend that was lost.

Chapter XXIV

Lieutenant Manners at a Disadvantage

TOM was very happy at finding his friends again. A warm glow coursed through his veins. He wished he knew some way to express to them his gratitude for their immediate acceptance of his story.

Unfortunately, the only way just now was one he could not follow. He listened to Mrs. Gallup patiently, heard all her arguments against the duel, and clung doggedly to his ground.

"It's not that I want to fight him," he explained more than once. "It would suit me fine if he would call it off. But I'm tied up in a sack I got to go through. No other way. Lieutenant Manners will tell you so."

But Lieutenant Manners stood in a corner and sulked. He was not going to be drawn into this. It was all very well for these ladies to be kind to the orphan boy they had befriended, but he could see no need of stressing their interest so much. Virginia, to be sure, did not say much, but he could see that she was absorbed by the drama of this lad's fate.

In the end Mrs. Gallup gave up. She realized that nothing she could say would move Tom.

"Promise me one thing," she said. "Promise me that you'll go home tonight and stay there, that you won't expose yourself foolishly until the time set for the duel."

"I'll promise that," Tom agreed promptly. He was eager to go as far as he could in pleasing his friends.

"You are not staying at the Denver House, are you?"

"No. Fact is, I'm campin' out on the prairie."

"Well, be careful please. This man Shipley would not stop at murdering you if he could."

"Oh, do be careful," Virginia added in a low voice.

"I'll sure not throw down on myself," Tom promised. Her words set a fire burning in his veins. He wanted to thank them both but did not know how. He shook hands with them both, bowed to Manners, and departed.

Mrs. Gallup turned at once to Manners. She was very pale.

"I've got to see this man Shipley tonight. Can you get him to talk with me?"

"No, Mrs. Gallup, I can't. The fellow is a ruffian of the worst type. I'm not go-

ing to have you soiled by meeting such a man, not if I can help it." The lieutenant was flushing, but his voice had a note of crisp refusal. He had gone just as far as he was going with this nonsense.

Mary did not argue with him. She had more important business on hand. "Will you find Mr. Brett for me, then?"

"If you insist on it," he said sullenly. "But I wish you would listen to me and keep out of this, Mrs. Gallup."

"I can't do that," she replied. "Will you get Mr. Brett at once please?"

"I'll get him." He fumbled for a way to say what was in his mind without offence. "I think you're making a mistake, Mrs. Gallup. You've already gone far enough—too far. This isn't a business for a lady. You don't understand. If you did——"

"I think I do."

"No, Mrs. Gallup, you don't. This fellow Wilson is a ruffian. You ought never to meet such a man. The bloom of womanhood——"

SHE smiled. "But that's a difference in point of view, Lieutenant. You are of an old aristocratic family. We are of pioneer stock. Always we have come to close grips with hard and cruel facts. The women you know haven't had to do this. We live in wholly different conditions."

"I know. You shouldn't be out here at all, you and Miss Virginia."

"But that's nonsense. We have to make a living, and as soon as our bakeshop is started we'll do famously."

"Bakeshop!" he echoed.

"Yes. We're going to sell bread and cakes and pies."

His heart sank. He was honestly very fond of Virginia, but her aunt made it hard for him.

"Do you mean—a regular shop? You'll sell to everybody?"

"To everybody who will buy."

Virginia spoke up, a spark of resentment in her eye. "We hope you'll sample our wares, Lieutenant, and give us your patronage," she said, with a curtsey.

He felt the edge of the remark. "I'm quite sure they will be very good," he said.

Again he felt he had been put in the wrong unjustly. It was all very well for Mrs. Gallup to smile. None the less he stood his ground in his mind. The fine flower of womanhood could not retain its perfect bloom if it came in contact with every Tom, Dick and Harry. Some women had to work of course, but the only occupation fit for such a girl as Virginia was to be queen of her husband's home and heart. He was at war with himself. The warm youth of him wanted to hold her close and protect her from the world. His brain told him it would never do, unless she could give up the ideas that seemed so fundamentally a part of her.

As soon as he had gone on his errand Virginia turned to her aunt with a little flare of feminine bitterness. "Why does he spend so much of his time with us if he thinks we're not ladies?" she flung out.

Mrs. Gallup suspected that the girl's fancy had fastened on this handsome lad. She sympathized with her niece. It was hard for her. Yet, though she had gone such a little way on the road of life, it was necessary for her to face facts.

"He's a nice boy, one of the finest I know," she said gently. "You mustn't blame him because his ideas are different from ours. It's the way he has been brought up."

"He thinks it's a disgrace for a woman to work. As though we could help it." Tears were stinging the girl's eyes.

Her aunt let an arm slip for a moment around Virginia's shoulders in a little pressure of affection. "It's because he likes you so well, dear, that he cares. He is fighting against his traditions and his training. It isn't an easy situation for him, either."

"It's a funny way to like me," the girl demurred with spirit. "To make me feel inferior all the time."

"Not all the time," Mary corrected. "It's just occasionally. Usually he's a dear sweet boy, very kind and considerate to us."

"Oh, kind!" Virginia scoffed. "He's kind enough. But he's so stiff and proper when he rides his high horse. You'd think a girl had to live in a glass cage to protect herself. His kind of women never cooked a biscuit or swept a floor."

Mrs. Gallup nodded appreciation. "It disturbs him that you have to live the way you do among the people you do. I sup-

pose his mind goes back to plantation life, with all that means—its ease and luxury and restraints."

"I should think he'd know he couldn't make us over. If he wants to know us he'll have to take us as we are."

"Yes," agreed Mary. "He'll see that finally, but he is trying not to see it." Her swift smile flashed. "And it happens that he wants to know one of us very much."

Virginia blushed. "Because I'm the only girl here, and he's the sort that likes girls. If there were others in town——"

The aunt's eyes rested fondly on the soft lovely vivid young creature. "If there were a hundred others in town he'd come to see you, Jinnie, dear."

"When he forgets that he's Randolph Manners he *is* the nicest boy ever," Virginia conceded.

It was perhaps ten minutes later that the officer returned with Brett. He was the man who had been with Mrs. Gallup when Tom and the Indian girl had seen them as they entered Denver. George Brett was a strong well built man with honest gray eyes and a mouth that suggested an appreciation of humor. The hair around his temples was graying, but his movements told that he was in the prime of manhood, vigorous and forceful.

Mrs. Gallup explained what she wanted. He considered a moment before he answered.

"You are not going to see this Wilson alone?" he said.

"No. That won't be necessary. I'd rather you and Lieutenant Manners would be present if you will."

"That would be better," he admitted.

Her eyes met his fairly. "I understand there is danger for you if you do this, Mr. Brett. Not at the time, but afterward. He'll owe us all a grudge, and if he ever gets the chance to take it out on you——"

Brett shrugged. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Of course I'm not sure I can get him to come, but I'll do my best."

"I know you will," Mrs. Gallup said gratefully.

Chapter XXV

BECKWOURTH TAKES A HAND

WILSON was far from being a happy man. He had let himself get caught in a trap, and he could see no way out unless young Collins weakened. Of course the boy would lose his nerve now that his bluff had been called. Mose told himsef so a dozen times. It was not reasonable to suppose that he would stand up there and let Wilson pump a dozen buckshot into his heart or his stomach. No man could be such a darned fool as that. It just was not in human nature.

But suppose Collins went through. Wilson could not escape that possibility. He sat there at the table where he and Musgrove had composed and written the acceptance to his opponent's terms and he drank gloomily to drown his apprehension. What an idiot he had been! Under the spur of his own bad temper he had worked himself into the fury that had betrayed him.

Collins would weaken. No doubt of that. But what was to be done if he did not? Mose ground his teeth in impotent rage. It would not be safe now to shoot this Collins in the dark, unless he hit the trail at once for parts unknown. He would be suspected, tried by a people's court, convicted on presumptive evidence, and hanged. Even if he lit out he would be followed and perhaps captured. His own associates would not hide him, might even give him up; for they were hardy ruffians and demanded above all gameness in their leader. Already Musgrove was breaking away from him. He could see that.

It looked as though he would have to go through or sneak away before the time set for the duel. Unless of course Collins lost his nerve. And that was bound to happen.

HIS man Dave bolstered up this opinion, and though the man's confidence heartened Wilson at the same time it angered him. Dave could be cheerful about

it. That was easy. It was not he that had to stand up to the scatter gun. Mose cursed both him and Musgrove. Unreasonably he blamed them for having let him get into this. He cursed the world at large.

After supper Wilson and his satellites made a tour of the saloons and gambling houses. The bully knew that he was the focus of all eyes. This flattered him, even though he knew that most of those watching would be glad to see him killed. He swaggered, boasting lustily. It would never do to let them guess he had any doubts.

Those who spoke to him treated him with great respect. They did not know how shaken he was behind this brave front.

Presently he found himself in the Criterion seated at a table opposite Beckwourth.

The ex-Crow chief's lead was not reassuring. "You're sure a gamer man than I am, Wilson," he said with a smile. "I give you best. Me, I'd hate to stand up to this fellow Collins with a scatter gun in his hands. My guess would be that he is sudden death."

Wilson's heart turned over inside him.

"What makes you say so?" he demanded irritably. "He's nothin' but a kid playin' smart. I'll show him."

"That's sure the way to feel about it," Beckwourth admitted. "No use gettin' scared just because he's a bad hombre to face. There's always a chance yore luck will stand up an' you'll get through alive. I'd hate to have to take it, like I said already, but I'm for any man that's got the guts to go up against sure death."

"Nothin' to that. Nothin' a-tall. How do you figure this kid such a world beater? Why, I've taken the hide off'n him twenty times an' I'd ought to know." Mose was exasperated, but much more he was worried and harrassed.

"Clear grit. That's how I size him up. Say, one thing you want to be careful of. Some of the boys think you'll get scared an' fire before the signal. If you do, they're figurin' on a necktie party right there. I told 'em 'No chance,' that you was game."

Mose was drinking steadily, but somehow his throat and mouth were dry. He had to swallow an ache before he could answer, "Bet yore boots I'm game."

"Yes, sir," Beckwourth went on. "Take a fellow like Collins, with those cold steady gray eyes, an' you can 'most always tell he's dangerous. Still, there's no tellin'. You might get him, too. I wouldn't be surprised if it happens thataway. I've heard several bets."

"What—what are they bettin'?" asked Mose hoarsely.

"Three to one Collins kills you. Even money both of you are buried inside of a week. I kinda like that last bet myself. You're no rabbit yore own self, I been tellin' the boys. You got a reputation as a killer. I won't take that three to one bet on Collins. I been askin' for two to one."

"You're tryin' to scare me."

"Scare you!" Beckwourth showed innocent surprise. "I'd have a lot of luck scarin' a wolf like you. No, I thought I'd just say a cheerful word as I was passing."

DAVE spoke up. "Mose don't need any cheerful words. He's got this bird where he wants him. We don't give a billy-be-damn what they're bettin'. He's going to sleep in smoke, this Collins. Y'betcha! This ol' horned toad Mose is a sure-enough wolf, an' this ornery town will know it right soon. He's hot as a ginger mill to get at this cockeyed son-of-a-gun, an' when he's finished with him the guy will be deader'n a Chinaman."

Beckwourth tugged at his mustache. "Maybeso. I'd give six bits to know how it will come out. You never can tell."

The ex-Crow chief had said enough, and he knew it. He harked away from the subject to more casual ones. "Met a fellow today just back from the Gregory Diggings. He struck the color an' claims he has a good thing. More than twenty sluices operatin' there, an' more building."

"Wonder how a good gambling house would go there," Dave mused aloud. "I

been thinkin' of goin' in with one."

"Don't know. They are a law an' order crowd. Gave a young fellow thirty lashes last week for stealing."

"I've heard it ain't a wild camp. Fellow gouged another with a bowie in an argument an' they hanged him. Say, what about South Boulder Creek?" asked Dave.

"Uncle Dick came down the other day. He says the only thing that has been took outa there yet is a drunk that fell in. I've a notion Tarryall Gulch is good. That South Park country is rich with ore. I've drifted around there quite a bit. Lots of antelope, elk, mountain sheep, wild turkeys an' grouse there. Some buffalo, too. An' all the fish a fellow wants. A mighty easy country to live in."

"I dunno what you got to back yore notion that this Collins is a bad man with a gun," Wilson broke out. "What's he ever done folks should pick him to beat me? Spit it out. Where's his record, if any? I'm the best an' quickest shot west of the river—or east, either, come to that."

"Any notches on yore scatter gun?" Beckwourth asked.

Mose understood the inference. He did not need to have it driven home that skill would not count here. It would be a question of luck and cold nerve.

Beckwourth knew his work was done. The fellow was badly worried, much more so since he had talked with him. The scout rose and nodded good-by.

"See you here tomorrow night maybe," he said. "I'm headin' for home now."

Had there been the slightest possible hesitation before the word "Maybe"? Wilson was not sure. His nerves were jumpy and he might be imagining things. Tomorrow night! Before then they might be digging a grave for him. Mose felt a cold chill shudder down his spine. What a fool he had been to let himself in for this.

HE GOT up and wandered over to Denver Hall with Dave. From habit he still swaggered, still boasted. But the bottom had gone out of his heart. It was hard to act the part of a rakehelly with that weight of lead inside him. The place roared with tides of lusty life. Men in buckskin with long fringes! Men in boots and woolen shirts of checkered hues! Men of unkempt locks and shaggy beards! Nearly all of them with bowies and revolvers hanging from their belts. In the midst of this raw rough vitality Wilson felt as though stricken with illness.

He was standing before a faro table when a man spoke to him.

"This Mr. Wilson?"

Mose turned and looked the man up and down. He saw a strong well built man about forty.

"Who are you? What you want?"

"My name is Brett—George Brett. A lady would like to see you, Mr. Wilson."

"What lady?" The killer was instantly alive with suspicion. This might be a plot to get him out and ambush him.

"A Mrs. Gallup. I think she used to know you long ago, but I am not sure about that. She asked me to tell you that she has something it is important you hear at once."

"What is it?"

"She didn't tell me. I gathered it was some warning as to danger. It is very necessary for you to hear it tonight she told me."

"Say, fellow, do I look like a tenderfoot?"

"I'm giving you a message," Brett replied stiffly. "Take it or leave it, Mr. Wilson."

"Don't get heavy with me, mister!"

Brett flashed to anger, real or assumed. "There is no occasion to bully me, sir. I came from a lady. As I understand it she has information that may save your life. If you don't wish to see her that of course ends the matter." He turned on his heel as though to leave.

It was a good stroke, well conceived. Wilson dared not let the matter drop so. He was full of apprehensions and ready to snatch at any way out.

"How do I know it ain't a trap to bushwhack me?" he shrilled.

The other man looked at him coldly. "If you think so better not go."

"Where's this woman at?"

"Mrs. Gallup is at her home, about three blocks from here."

"Why can't she come here if she wants to see me so bad?"

"She didn't tell me she wanted to see you that badly. She may have overheard something. If you're not interested that ends the matter. Good evening, sir."

"I dunno who you are," the bad man said sulkily.

Brett's level eyes met his steadily. "I am a law abiding citizen. If it were worth while I could give references."

"Tell you one thing, fellow. If I go I'm takin' a coupla friends along. See?"

"As you please about that."

"An' I'm choosin' the way we go."

"Why not?"

"An' you're walkin' on my left. If anyone makes a play at me, why, it'll be twelve o'clock for you, mister."

"You're doing a lot of worrying for nothing," Brett said coldly.

"Maybeso. You'll find I'm wagon boss on this trip."

Brett lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

CHAPTER XXVI

MOSE WILSON FINDS AN EXCUSE

WILSON took with him Buck Comstock and Dave. Brett walked on the left of Mose, and the killer's right hand rested on the butt of his revolver. The party left by the back door of the Denver and turned to the left, following close to the bank of the creek. It moved warily, keeping in the shadow of the bushes.

"Keep yore eyes skinned, fellows," Mose warned. "If you see anyone lying low, go to foggin'. I'll take care of this pilgrim here first off."

For several hundred yards they moved along Cherry Creek, then swung to the left in a wide circle.

"Where's this house at from here?" Wilson asked of his guide.

"It is back from the creek some distance. We've been going all round Robin Hood's barn to get there," replied Brett.

Presently Brett showed Wilson the house. They approached from the rear as quietly as possible.

"If this is a trap, fellow, Lord help you," Mose murmured, whispering his threat in the ear of his guide. "I'll git you sure." His revolver was out, the barrel pressing against the ribs of Brett.

Comstock knocked on the door. It was opened by Mary Gallup. Brett spoke.

"Mr. Wilson is here, Mrs. Gallup," he said.

She moved back and said, "Come in." A sudden shrinking at sight of Wilson went over her and left her for the moment weak. She leaned against the table for support.

Wilson's glance swept the room. His mouth was a thin cruel slit in a hard forbidding face. His eyes took in Mrs. Gallup, Virginia and Lieutenant Manners. They came to rest on the officer. The young man was in uniform. This was reassuring. In a manner of speaking he represented law and safety. Mose stepped with catlike litheness to one side of the door in order to be out of range from any sharpshooter on the prairie.

"Come in, you fellows—shut the door," he ordered.

They came in, closing the door behind them.

The sight of these ruffians was appalling to Virginia. One of them had murdered her father. The knowledge of this took her by the throat and obstructed breathing. She could not take her fascinated eyes from Mose Wilson. She was sure he was the stage robber who had ridden with them. It was horrible to have to look at him, into the shallow shifting eyes shining with fear and suspicion. Yet she could not lift her gaze from him. Coming across the plains, she had once seen a bird paralyzed by a rattlesnake as it slid forward, its head weaving slightly from side to side. Virginia was for the moment that bird.

Mose made sure the window was screened by a curtain before he spoke to Mrs. Gallup.

"Well, ma'am, I'm here," he said harshly. Then his eyes dilated. He recognized her and felt a quick spasm of fear.

Mary did not ask him to sit down. She

did not sit herself. It seemed to her that to breathe the same air as this creature was poisonous. She must do what must be done and get rid of him as quickly as possible.

"I sent for you—about this duel."

"What about it?" he demanded.

"It must not be. You must stop it."

IT WAS evident to Wilson that she was laboring under some repressed emotion. His vanity jumped to what seemed to him the most plausible explanation of it. She had fallen in love with him even though she probably would not admit it to herself. Why not? He had had his conquests with women, a good many of them. There is a type which offers adulation to the male who is a handsome masterful brute. Mose had been good looking once in a coarse flamboyant way. He still considered himself so.

"Howcome you are buyin' chips to sit in, ma'am?" he asked.

"It's plain murder. I won't have it."

Even while he complacently twirled his mustache with the fingers of his left hand his brain was busy with thoughts of safety. Was there a way she could protect him from this danger?

He blustered. "This slit-eyed pilgrim Collins aims to scare me out. He's runnin' a sandy, but it won't work."

"Perhaps I'd better tell you who I am," she said. But she did not tell him at once.

"I'm some curious," he admitted. "I was sure taken a heap with you when we met last." He had not till now removed his big hat, but he swept it off with a raffish bow.

"Your name was Shipley when I heard of you before." She paused, struggled for words, then spoke them in a low clear voice. "I am the sister of Abner Leeds. This is his daughter."

The shot of a pistol could scarcely have startled him more. The shock came out of a clear sky, in the full tide of his self-satisfaction. He had slid the Colt's back into its scabbard. Now his hand twitched toward it convulsively. He crouched. His eyes narrowed, shifted toward Brett and then toward Manners as he drew back to the wall.

"What's the game?"

His voice was a whisper.

"Go slow," advised Brett quickly. "We're not shooting this out."

The killer's fear relaxed, but not his wariness. He saw that neither of this woman's friends had reached for a gun.

"Onload yore li'l piece. Tell it quick," he snarled. "Whad you want with me?"

"Mrs. Gallup has told you," Brett said. "She wants this duel stopped."

WILSON spoke, out of the corner of his mouth. "She can speak for herself, can't she? An' listen. All of you. Run on me, an' it'll be hotter'n hell with the blower on right here an' right now."

"Don't get excited, Mr. Wilson. I didn't bring you here for any fireworks," Brett replied.

"Lucky for you. I'm sudden death to fool pilgrims who try to beat me to the draw. I've got birds like that planted in all the Boot Hills west of the river. Start anything, fellow, an' I'll be there."

"I've been trying to tell you ever since I met you that we're law abiding citizens and not desperadoes. This gentleman is Lieutenant Manners of the United States Army. These ladies have come from the East. If you'd get it out of your head that we employ the tactics of ruffians——"

"Meanin' me, maybe."

"Meaning bad men in general. Now if you'll give Mrs. Gallup a minute and listen to what she has to say the business will be finished quicker."

"I'll listen," the gunman growled. "An' it had better please me, what she says. I'm a bad man to rile."

"Don't threaten Mrs. Gallup, sir," ordered Manners crisply. "I can find authority to take care of you if necessary."

"What for, Mr. Officer? I ain't breakin' any U. S. laws."

Manners flushed. "I'm not accountable to you, sir, for my actions," he replied stiffly.

"We ain't gettin' anywheres, Mose," said the man Dave to his chief. "You're gettin' off on the wrong foot. This is no trap to dry gulch you. Better listen to the lady's proposition."

"I'm listenin'," Mose answered sulkily.

Mary Gallup looked straight into his shallow shifty eyes.

"It does not take long to say what I want to say. It's just this. I swear before heaven that if you go on with this duel and kill Tom Collins I'll have you arrested and tried by a people's court for the murder of my brother and for robbing the stage."

"I didn't kill yore brother. It's a lie."

Mrs. Gallup stopped by a gesture the impetuous movement of Manners to call the fellow to account for his words.

"You were thrashed by him. You made threats. You disappeared before his body was found. You changed your name and fled to the West. Since then you have killed men several times. You boasted of it a minute ago. You are a suspected horse-thief and a known stage robber. What chance would you have before a people's court after you had just murdered this boy Collins?"

Mose looked at her, eyes furious with baffled hatred. It was true what she said. He knew that the sentiment of the Cherry Creek settlements was for law and order, in spite of the minority of desperadoes who infested the place. Moreover, he had been so overbearing that he doubted whether the worst element of the place would make any effort to save him. If he should be haled before a people's court his shrift would be very short.

"He's been hidin' behind yore skirts, has he—this Collins?" he jeered.

"No, sir, he has not. He intends to kill you tomorrow. Good riddance, too." The young West Pointer snapped his words out scornfully.

"Now go," Mrs. Gallup ordered. "At once. I can't breathe the same air as you."

"I'm gettin' a rotten deal," protested Wilson sourly. "Goddlemighty, I——"

"Did you hear Mrs. Gallup?" Manners moved forward.

The killer's eyes narrowed. "I'm going, young fellow. But don't you git high heeled with me. It ain't supposed to be safe."

"Don't try to bluff me, man," the youngster flung out. "I'm the army, in the absence of a superior officer. For two bits I'd arrest you and look up your record. Don't argue with me. Get out."

Buck Comstock spoke, for the first time since he had come into the room. He had no intention of coming into conflict with the United States Army or of inviting the investigation of a people's court merely to humor Mose Wilson.

"Do as you like, Mose," he said abruptly. "Me, I'm not lookin' for trouble. What this young fellow says goes with me. I'm sayin' good-by."

DAVE assented, promptly and forcefully. One of the fool habits of vigilance committees, or people's courts if one preferred to call them that, was that they did not always stop with the case in hand. They had a way of starting cleanups that extended to friends and associates of the immediately guilty party. He did more than agree with Comstock. He opened the door and walked out.

Buck followed him.

"I ain't scared of any of you," Mose made declaration savagely. "You've run in a fixed deck on me. I'm going now, but one o' these days——"

"Yes, one of these days—?" asked Manners, following the man as he backed toward the door.

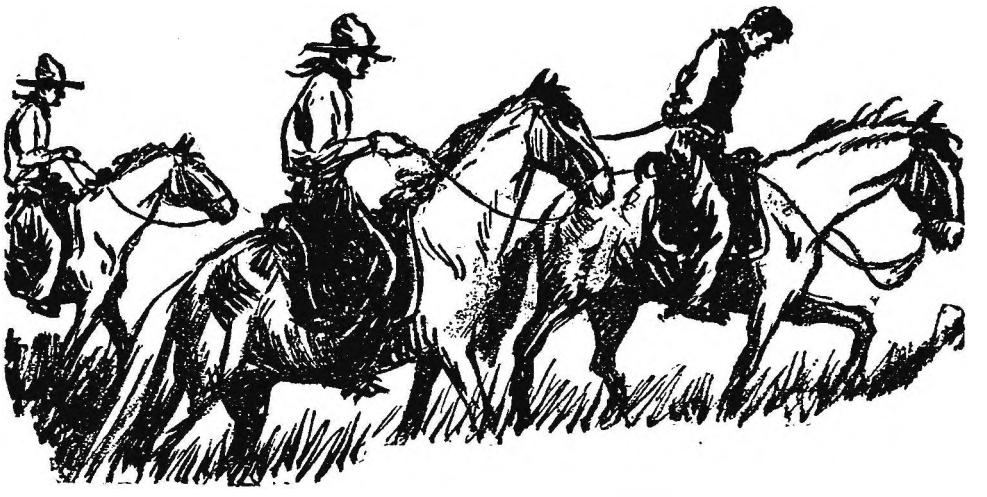
"Why, it'll be different."

Mose backed into the side of the doorway, cursed and slid out into the night.

It was characteristic of him that he began to blame his companions for having deserted him. They answered his berating in kind, and they went away quarreling.

None the less Mose was pleased in his heart at what had occurred. He could back down now gracefully. With the shadows of the government and a people's court moving toward him he could not be expected to proceed with the duel. He would storm and threaten for a while before his companions to save his face, then slip away quietly during the night.

(*Concluded in our next issue.*)



DOUBLE ACTION

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Author of "The Back Trail," "The Law of Glancing Bullets," etc.

WHEN THE BEAR CAT MINE PAYROLL WAS HELD UP AND THE GUARD MURDERED, IT LOOKED AS IF A LOT OF THINGS HAD BROKEN LOOSE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE THREE-IN-A-BOX RANCH. THEN ALONG CAME DOUBLE, DIRECT AND IMMEDIATE ACTION AND EVENTS TOOK ANOTHER TURN

BLACK hills silhouetted against the star studded sky, forming a natural amphitheatre in the center of which the glowing windows of the Three-in-a-box bunkhouse gleamed like panels of gold.

Within the bunkhouse five men and a boy sat about a worn, knife-carved table, their faces illuminated by the white light of a gasoline lantern which hung from a rafter.

A card game was in progress, and the men said but little, reaching for cards, pushing in chips, raking in pots, all with that smooth, rippling ease of motion which indicates perfect health.

About the gasoline lantern various insects circled in bewildered spirals, occasionally beating their wings against the hot, glass chimney, falling to the table where they writhed in agony until a calloused hand brushed them casually to the floor.

It was summer, and the windows were open for ventilation. The faces of the men glistened with fine perspiration. Shirts open at the neck, sleeves rolled high, the men shuffled, dealt, discarded, bet, and then began all over again.

Suddenly, Phil Foster straightened, midway in a deal, holding the bent pasteboards in thick fingers, his head cocked slightly to one side, his forehead puckered.

Then his gray eyes made a swift, sweeping survey of the others at the table.

"Hear it?"

One man nodded. The others looked at him curiously.

"Bronc gallopin'. Rider. Comin' lickety-larrup," he explained tersely, laying the cards down on the table, shifting in his chair.

BY THAT time the sound had become measurably nearer, was audible to each of the players. In the frantic tempo of the beating hoofs there was a subtle suggestion of danger. Ears attuned to the noises of the open spaces, these men knew that the horse was not merely sweeping on at an easy gallop. He was being pushed for everything that was in him.

Bob Aley looked at his watch.

"Ten o'clock," he muttered.

The words were received without comment. The lateness of the hour meant as much as the frantic galloping of the horse.

Kenneth Stewart, the youngster, a lad of fifteen or sixteen, sidled closer to Bob Aley, and Bob's hand almost unconsciously reached out, patted the lad's shoulder reassuringly.

The hoofbeats swelled to a roar, faltered a bit with the irregularity of broken stride, then merged into a rattling sound of flying gravel, almost in front of the door. The horse slid to a stop.

Phil Foster's broad shoulder blocked the entrance as he threw back the door and called out into the black wall of the surrounding night.

"Who is it?"

"That you, Phil?"

"Yeah."

"Come out here a minute. I want a word with yuh."

The cowpuncher hesitated.

"Say, come out here in the light so I can see who yuh are— Oh, hello, Sheriff. Sure. Comin'. Deal me out, you waddies."

The broad shoulders swung out into the night.

At the table the men made no move to resume the interrupted game. They glanced up at each other, puzzled.

"Wonder what's up? Somethin' important. Sheriff Fancher's an' old fox an' he usually catches his man by headwork, he ain't latherin' hossflesh for nothin'."

The speaker was a man of middle age, deeply tanned, a network of wrinkles corrugating the weather-beaten face.

Bob Aley nodded.

"Yore dead right there. The sheriff don't get stampeded easy."

AGAIN there was a silence about the table. From the night without came the hum of voices, carefully lowered so that the words were not distinguishable within the room.

"Oh, all right. If yuh want it that way," sounded Phil Foster's voice as he turned and again stood framed in the doorway. "C'mon in."

He advanced, stood slightly to one side and motioned the newcomer to enter.

Sheriff Fancher was a grizzled old warrior, a drooping, dust-colored mustache hung indolently downward on each side of his chin. His faded eyes seemed covered with a film of desert dust, lackluster, easy-going. His clothes had been bleached by sun, impregnated with alkali dust until they had lost any individuality of color, All in all, he matched the sandy wastes of the dust-colored desert so typically that he might have been created from a dust storm as Venus was reputed to have sprung from the foam of a breaker.

"Evenin', boys. Don't let me interrupt. Go on with yore game."

One of the men shot out an eager question, but the sheriff waved a horny hand.

"Go on with yore game," was all he said, and there was a subtle ring of command in his voice.

Phil Foster picked up the deck of cards and resumed his interrupted deal.

The cards flipped out, one, two, three, four, five. The men picked up the pasteboards, studied them surreptitiously, either knocked on the table or slid rattling chips into the pot in the center; but their minds were not on the game.

Back of them, watching them with the expression of a gray hawk, his eyes missing not a single move, Sheriff Fancher sat in brooding silence.

At length he cleared his throat.

"I'm wantin' you boys to take a little ride with me," he said. "There's somethin' down the road a piece that maybe you can give me a little help on."

The cards dropped to the table, chairs scraped upon the rough, board floor.

"What is it, Sheriff?"

EARNEST SARGENT, the middle-aged cowpuncher whose face was tanned by the suns of fifty summers on the range, asked the question with quiet insistence.

Sheriff Fancher looked at him almost regretfully.

"Murder down the road a piece."

"What!"

"Yep."

Silence for a moment.

"Who was it?"

The voice was that of Bob Aley, and sounded harsh, strained.

The sheriff turned his desert-colored eyes upon the tall cowpuncher.

"Guess," he invited.

Bob Aley's brows came together.

"Say, what's the idea? How could I guess, and why should I? What're yuh so plumb mysterious about?"

The sheriff hesitated a moment, then spoke laconically.

"It's Sam Gale. He had the payroll for the Bear Cat Mine. They pulled him outa his machine, tied him up, an' cut his throat, ear to ear. Hell of a mess. Want you boys should help me on some trackin' an' a search."

The news was received in momentary, white-faced silence.

Earny Sargeant, he who had seen much of the range, who knew the sheriff as well as any man present, stroked his chin with stubby fingers.

"Well, why didn't yuh say so in the first place? What was the idea in lettin' us get started with our game again? Why not——?"

The dusty eyes turned his way, and his voice trailed off into sudden silence.

"Well, get the broncs up."

It was Phil Foster who spoke, the foreman of the ranch, and his words carried the spur of an instant order.

The men galvanized into action and started for the door to the tune of clumping heels, short, shuffling steps, hitching up their overalls, tightening their belts.

"You stay here, kid."

The sheriff's voice was kindly, yet final.

Kenneth Stewart shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, his young manhood outraged at being treated as a child, his immature spirit quailing at the prospect of being left alone in the night.

Bob Aley ventured a quiet word to the officer.

"He don't need to go too close, but he might's well come."

THE sheriff turned his eyes on the speaker, let them flicker up and down the tall cowpuncher, taking in every detail of clothing.

"You were plannin' to head out for the line camp in the mornin'?"

Bob nodded. "I was, but it ain't nothin' but what'll keep. I was goin' to get an early start."

"How early?"

At the tone of the question Bob Aley became suddenly stiff. It was as though he had thrown up a guard. His manner showed the subtle change, and it was apparent in his guarded tone.

"Maybe pretty early."

"How early?"

The cowpunchers who had left the bunkhouse suddenly stopped, turned to listen to this bit of dialogue.

"Early. Before daylight. Why?"

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothin'. Just wonderin'. Let's go."

Like awkward, stumbling shadows, the men clumped to the corrals, showing as black blotches upon the dark yard, moving in silence save for the sound of their feet.

From the corral presently came startled snorts, low-voiced reassuring words, sounds of plunging animals, an occasional curse. Saddles were flipped up on quivering backs, cinches tightened, cold bits slipped into unwilling mouths, and gradually, one at a time, horseman moved swiftly out from the dark shadows of the ranch buildings, milled about the center of the yard, waiting until all should be ready.

"This way, boys."

THE sheriff's voice came through the darkness with a swift snap, and his horse started at a brisk lope. The others fell into line and followed, a little cavalcade that moved swiftly over the face of the star-lit plain to the accompaniment of creaking saddle leather, jingling spurs and shuffling hoofs. There was no sound of human voice, nothing but the mere noises incident to progress.

A strange suspense had fallen upon the men of the Three-in-a-box.

In the east the Soda Springs Mountains were colored with a band of gold. An old moon was rising.

Earny Sargeant, wise in the ways of men of the desert, knowing the sheriff for the old fox he was, shrugged his shoulders and muttered to himself.

"Came in a hell of a hurry until he saw *someone* was there. Then he lost his hurry an' waited for the moon to rise before goin' back. He timed his pullin' out so the moon would be gettin' well up."

Again the old-time cowpuncher shrugged his shoulders. He had seen many changes on the range, had seen much of violence and bloodshed. And he had learned to keep his eyes and ears open to make shrewd observations, and to keep his own counsel.

The sheriff led the way down the trail toward the county road, increasing his pace

slightly, and ever and anon, glancing at the rising moon, then back at the dark shapes behind, shapes which were now casting long, grotesquely dancing shadows.

The Three-in-a-box had its headquarters on an elevated plain in the center of an amphitheatre of hills. The cavalcade soon came to the end of the plateau, slacked its speed and single-filed up the zig-zagging trail over the hogback, down into a little canyon and out onto pine clad slopes. Below them stretched the white silence of the desert. The trail ran between patches of sage and scattered pine clumps. Far below to the east there sounded the roar of Deer Creek as it purled over rocks tumbling toward the desert where it was sucked up by the dry sands.

A mile more and they came to the county road, a road over which it was possible to drive an automobile, the road which ran to the Bear Cat Mine.

Here the sheriff swung to one side, leaving room for two other riders to come abreast. Ahead there loomed the reddish lights of an automobile, their beam directed to one side of the road. Those in the rear crowded forward, and Sheriff Fancher checked his horse.

"Get over on one side here," he said.

Somewhere in the half darkness a horse snorted, gave a wild plunge. Then another animal stopped, ears cocked forward, eyes wide, nostrils quivering. The horses' keen nostrils had detected the presence of the ghastly thing in front of them.

"He's lyin' just as we found him," remarked the sheriff. "Better get off an' give me a hand readin' trail. Careful yuh don't mess things up any, 'cause there may be footprints in the dust there by the machine."

The men dropped bridle reins over the heads of the horses, swung from the saddles and walked awkwardly forward in embarrassed silence.

The sheriff kept up a running fire of conversation.

"It's just where the creek trail comes up," he said, pointing to a white ribbon of trail which could be seen branching off from the road, running a short distance in the moonlight, then plunging into the shadow of a pine clump. "Evidently a horseman was waitin' there. Yuh can see his tracks. Step this way, boys, keepin' on the side so we won't blot out the tracks."

AN ELECTRIC flasnlight cast its dazzling beam on the white dust, and the men bent forward.

"Why that's the track of——"

Earney Sargent bit his exclamation in two and lapsed into silence.

The sheriff turned to him.

"Yes, Earny, yuh was sayin' that was the track of——?"

"Oh, nothin'; I seen that broken shoe tip an' wondered if I hadn't seen the track some place before, but guess I hadn't."

There was dry irony in the voice of the sheriff.

"Well, try guessin' again."

Sargent shrugged his shoulders, his silence as absolutely final as that which wrapped the slumbering desert below.

After a minute the sheriff seemed to give it up, and moved back along the branch trail. The men with him were plainly uneasy, glancing at each other with curious, furtive glances.

"Yuh see, they held him up, an' dragged him from the machine. Then they tied him up, hand an' foot—an' it don't seem from the tracks that Sam did much strugglin'. Maybe he was lookin' down the business

end of a forty-five. Anyhow, he got tied up good an' tight, an' then yuh can see what happened."

The beam of the flashlight shifted with swift rapidity, and the men recoiled from the sight which met their eyes. The sheriff, however, continued to play the light about the stiff figure.

"Seems like there was two of 'em. One probably waited ahead of the machine, an' the other swung up from the trail."

The flashlight wobbled a bit, glinted from a metallic something which lay in the dust, then shifted back to the gruesome figure.

"Somethin' in the dust there," mentioned Sargent.

"Where?"

"Back there where yuh had the beam a second ago—down this way—a little more over to the right—along in here somewhere. There—there it is."

"M'hmmm," muttered the sheriff, and knelt in the dust. Presently he raised a bone-handled hunting knife, held it in his hand so that the light rested full upon it.

THE blade was caked with red where the dust from the road had clung to the blade.

"Guess that's what done the trick, all right, boys. Maybe we can learn somethin' from this here knife. Looks like a home-made job o' carvin' this handle, a mountain lion with his head between his paws an'——"

He broke off as there sounded a swift drumming of hoofs in the soft dust. A dark figure, crouching low in the saddle, was spurring his mount up the road.

"It's Bob Aley!" yelled Phil Foster. "Get after him. Shoot!"

The sheriff held up a hand. "Easy, boys. Wait a minute."

Even as he spoke there was a blur of motion in the moonlight and three mounted men came from the shadows of the pines, blocking the road ahead of the galloping horse.

"Humph, thought it was funny the sheriff would be alone. Guessed he had somethin' up his sleeve," muttered Earny Sargent.

Aley saw the men ahead, jerked his cutting pony back and around, headed at

breakneck speed down the branch trail to the creek. This time he was sitting more erect in his saddle, leaning back slightly against the steep down-grade that was to come.

Phil Foster jerked a revolver from his holster, raised it, would have fired, but the sheriff pulled his arm down.

At that moment the fugitive seemed to leave the saddle, and sail through the air. He suddenly became a flapping figure, legs kicking frantically, swinging back and forth in the moonlight.

The sheriff started on a run.

"This way, boys."

As they bound Aley's feet and lowered him from the tree, the details of the sheriff's plans became more apparent.

Two men came up the trail, leading Bob Aley's black horse. The three men who had blocked the road came in and three more men emerged from the shadows of the road below.

"Yuh see, I had the exits all blocked," remarked Sheriff Fancher in his slow drawl, "an' I placed a loop between these two trees across the trail. I figured he might start down the trail, an' maybe that loop would take him off'n his bronc just about right so there wouldn't have to be no shootin' or nothin'."

"Then you'd found the knife before?" asked Phil Foster.

"Sure, sure," remarked the sheriff. "Not only found it, but we knew who it belonged to, an' we knew that track of the bronc with the broken shoe tip was made by Bob's hoss. But there's lots o' times when circumstantial evidence ain't the best in the world, particularly when it's against one o' the boys that lives here in the county. I just figgered I'd lay a trap, an' let you boys think I was all alone, an' then get yuh out here, an' just see what Bob Aley done when we found those things. If he'd come forward an' said why that's his knife, an' it sure looked like the tracks o' his bronc, that'd been one thing, but when he

sneaks out to one side, an' claps the spurs to his hoss an' starts high-tailin' it down the mountain—well, that's another thing, an' I guess it sorta cinches the case."

BOB ALEY said nothing. White of face, pale of lip, he stared straight ahead, and refused to answer questions.

Sheriff Fancher shrugged his shoulders.

"There's been a sight o' crimes around here that'll maybe get cleaned up now—if Bob talks."

A mutter ran around the group. The hold-up of Sam Gale had been but the culmination of a series of lawless acts which had been the cause of much speculation. There had been several hold-ups, some cattle rustling, and a murder or two.

"I'm hatin' to keep you waddies from yore rest," went on Sheriff Fancher, "but I should sorta ramble out an' look through Bob's things. Tell yuh what. I'll pilot him on into the county seat an' get him in the cooler, then I'll ramble back in the mornin', 'long about seven or eight an' we can go through his stuff then."

"Phil, will you an' Earny Sargent see that his stuff is kept safe an' that nobody takes nothin' away?"

The men nodded.

"Well, so long," remarked the officer, and he and his posse rode away in the moonlight.

THERE was little sleep for the men of the Three-in-a-box that night. By the time their horses were turned into the corral the men had split up into two factions, one arguing that Bob Aley should be lynched and probably would be, the other maintaining that he might, after all, be innocent.

Kenneth Stewart crawled into his blankets and covered his head, not that the night was cold, but because he was afraid the other men might see moisture in his eyes. Bob Aley had befriended him from the first day he had appeared at the ranch, had stood between him and the hazing a youngster usually receives in a cattle camp and Kenneth could not, would not, believe that Bob Aley was guilty of any crime.

He heard a whining sound near his bed, peeked out of the covers, and discovered Sandy, Bob Aley's dog, whimpering softly, his belly crouched on the floor, nose between his paws, eyes upturned.

Apparently the dog sensed that something was wrong. His master had ridden hurriedly forth and had not returned, and the voices of the men had been strangely altered in tone when they returned. That and the empty bed gave the dog enough of a clue to cause him to come whimpering to Kenneth.

THE youngster scooped the wiry-haired dog beneath the blankets, held him to his breast, whispered words of encouragement to the animal, and then dropped to sleep.

Kenneth had reached a decision. He would endeavor to prove the innocence of Bob Aley.

Early in the morning he quit his job,

saddled his horse, whistled Sandy to him, and started on a brisk lope for the county seat, giving to the curious men no inkling as to his purpose in leaving his employment.

A fatal fascination drew him to the scene of the crime. The body had been removed, and a rough rope enclosure surrounded the spot where the hold-up had taken place. A horse was standing to one side, and a man was down on hands and knees, going carefully over every inch of the ground, yet being careful not to get in the soft dust where he would obliterate any of the tracks.

He looked up swiftly at the approach of Kenneth and the dog.

"Hello, son. How come you're out here? Know anything about the hold-up?"

He was not over twenty-nine or thirty, yet there was about him a subtle poise, a swift surety of motion which stamped him as a man of character. Kenneth noticed that a cartridge belt crossed his hips and that a worn holster dangled along his leg, the bottom held in place by a buckskin thong. Aside from this there was nothing to distinguish him from the ordinary cowpuncher, yet Kenneth did not

think the man was a cowboy. In that section the punchers occasionally wore guns, but rarely upon cartridge belts. They usually carried a few extra shells in the shirt or overalls pocket. This man carried the glittering brass tubes openly, and in plentiful supply, and Kenneth noticed that while the belt and holster were old and worn shiny from much use, the cartridges were fresh, and glittered brightly.

Kenneth felt rather shy and self-conscious in the presence of this man.

"I was workin' up on the ranch where Bob Aley worked," he said at last, rather lamely.

The man nodded, scowled, looked about him, then let his hand drop to his belt.

"Sonny, yuh know it ain't right for murderers to live. When a man once commences to make a living out o' crime yuh can't tell where he's goin' to stop. Take the hombre that did this job, for instance. There ain't no question but what it's the work of the gang that's been holding up cowpunchers an' rustlin' cattle for years."

KENNETH would have said something, but the words did not seem ready to the tip of his tongue when he tried to speak. He kept silent, therefore, hung his head and let his hand scratch Sandy's ears.

The man had squatted on his heels, cowpuncher fashion, and now deftly rolled a cigarette with one hand while he gestured with the other.

"This here's the break I been waitin' for. Only I'd never have picked Bob Aley as bein' one of 'em."

Now Kenneth's tongue found words, found that words were spouting forth in hot indignation.

"Say, don't you ever go 'round talkin' about Bob Aley like that. I don't know who done this job, but I aim to find out. Maybe it was the bandits that did this job, all right; but Bob Aley ain't no bandit. He picked me up when I was just a green kid that couldn't hardly sit a horse, an' he sort o' fathered me an' made the other men lay off'n me when they wanted to send me after left-handed monkey wrenches an' right-legged stirrups. An' look what he done for Sandy here. This here's his dog, an' Bob Aley saved the life o' that dog. That's what he done——"

The boy felt moisture coming into his eyes, and the realization of the impending tears made him desperate. He had wanted to act like a grave, dignified man of the world, and now he was about to bawl in front of this stranger. Anything but that.

He whipped off his coat, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt.

"Any man that says Bob Aley's a bandit is a liar, a damn liar! You hear that? I'm sayin' you're a liar if you say Bob Aley had anything to do with that murder. A liar an' yuh don't dare to take it up. Fraid cat!"

The man looked at him with grave impassivity. The steady gray eyes neither faltered nor twinkled, instead they sought to penetrate the very soul of the lad.

Kenneth could feel his hot rage evaporating before the calm, steady scrutiny.

"Sonny, I ain't sayin' nothin' about who did this, an' if anything I said sort o' made it seem like I was blamin' it onto your friend, I apologize most humble. Me, I was just talkin', an' I ain't heard all the details o' things."

THE boy turned back toward his coat, picked it up, and took advantage of the motion to draw a surreptitious sleeve across his eyes.

"Well, I didn't mean nothin', Mister, but I thought what you said was intendin' to show Bob Aley up as a murderer an' a bandit."

"Naw," replied the other, "I was just lookin' things over, an' I'd heard they'd arrested Bob Aley. You know anything about the case, do yuh?"

Kenneth shook his head.

"I don't know nothin' about it, but I'm goin' to find out. Me an' Sandy, we done quit our jobs, an' we ain't goin' to work no more until we prove Bob Aley ain't guilty."

The stranger nodded with great and solemn gravity. His booted foot traced an idle design in the dust, and then he looked up with a smile, a disarming, friendly smile that softened every line of his bronzed face.

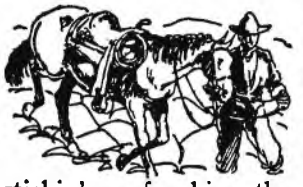
"Tell yuh what. I'm goin' on to the Three-in-a-box outfit, an' maybe it'd be a

good thing if you'd sort of ride along an' give me the low down on the boys an' what yuh know."

Kenneth looked at him sharply.

"You investigatin' this murder?"

"Well, now, I wouldn't say that exactly. But I'm sort of interested. Somehow it seems to me that if a man has a kid an' a dog stickin' up for him, there must be somethin' worth while to him."



Kenneth nodded earnestly.

"Sure, there is. He's just like a daddy to me. He's always sympathizin' with the fellow that's gettin' the worst of the deal. Sure I'll go."

On the half hour ride which followed the stranger managed to secure many facts by adroit questioning, but the facts seemed hardly significant.

Kenneth Stewart had been around the home ranch all day, and was, therefore, in a position to tell of the activities of the men. Most of them had been in by supper time. Bob Aley, however, had been sent out to look over some line fence, had come to a place where the fence had been broken down, and was late in getting in. In fact, he had not arrived until nine o'clock. Earnest Sargent had been out with a bunch of cattle, working them in to the main pasture and had also been late. Phil Foster, the foreman, had been present during the first part of the evening, but had been making swift trips back and forth about the ranch, finally getting in in time to help Earny Sargent work the steers into the pasture gate. Harry Whitney had been to town after mail, and had come in just as supper was over, the cook setting him out a plate of hot grub.

The man rode along at Kenneth's side, taking in all this information, seeming to turn it over in his mind. Then he gave his conclusions.

"Well, a fellow could have made it pretty quick from the place where the murder took place to the Three-in-a-box ranch, particularly if he was in a hurry. Maybe twenty minutes each way. Bob Aley was out until late, but so were several of the other waddies, so that don't mean nothin'. An' as far as that's concerned, I guess there'd be a lot o' fellows about this here valley that couldn't tell just where they was an' prove it. A cowboy don't punch no time clock an' he don't usually have no alibi except his bronc.

"Tell yuh what, sonny, we'll just do a little investigatin' around. Let's take a run out to where Bob Aley was repairin' that fence, an' take a look at the job. Maybe that'll tell us somethin' about how long he was workin'."

Kenneth nodded eagerly.

"Say, what'll I call yuh?" he asked.

THE stranger hesitated, tipped back the broad brim of his sombrero and ran stubby fingers through thick matted, chestnut hair.

"Well, s'pose yuh just call me 'Dub,'" he suggested.

Kenneth looked his confusion.

"Just Dub?"

"Yep, sonny, just Dub."

Kenneth gulped.

"All right, if you say so, but it sounds —well, it sounds sorta funny."

"Yeah, it does, don't it? Anyhow, that's the best name for yuh to start with."

They rode in silence for a few moments.

"D'yuh think dogs know good people from bad people, Dub? You know, would a dog make a pal outa a murderer?"

The man shook his head.

"No, sonny, dogs know—dogs an' kids."

Again they lapsed into silence. The trail narrowed, became merely a cattle trail winding along the hills. They took single file, rode briskly for some time, then Kenneth Stewart pointed to a distant fence.

"Bob was ridin' along here somewheres."

The man spurred his horse into the lead, stiffened in the saddle, seemed to become suddenly alert.

"Tracks along here—yep, there they fork. Over this way. There's where he was workin'."

The horses swung along the fence. Here roaming cattle had worn a trail along the strands of barbed wire. The horses made good time, paused before a place where

the fence showed signs of repairs. The man bent in the saddle, examined the strands of wire, the posts, staples, gave his verdict swiftly, with decision.

"A bad break, an' it wasn't made by cattle. Some one pulled down the fence, snaked out the staples, pulled the posts loose. Yuh can see there ain't no cattle tracks that'd account for that."

"But why should a man break down the fence?" Kenneth was puzzled.

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"For one reason someone might have wanted to keep Bob Aley here until after dark."

He neglected to mention the other reason, which was that Bob Aley might have purposely fixed the fence so that it would appear he had been detained for several hours. Much depended on the time Bob Aley had found the break and whether he had previously fixed things so that it could be repaired swiftly.

"Look, Dub, what's that glinting on the top of that butte?"

The man directed his eyes toward a yellow flash which intermittently came from the top of a sun swept butte that commanded a view of the entire region.

"That there, sonny, is the flashin' of the sun on somethin' brass—maybe the barrel of a telescope. Tell yuh what let's do. Let's start an' let the broncs work up a little sweat. Head for the Three-in-a-box, an' let's see how fast that critter of yours'll cover the ground. Me, I'll be scatterin' the gravel right behind."

Feeling a strange confidence in this man, Kenneth whirled his horse, tickled the sensitive flanks with the rowels, and set off at a gallop. Behind him the strange man urged greater speed.

They crashed through clumps of sage, skirted chaparral thickets, jumped dry washes, thundered along sun-baked side hills, tore through the cool shade of rustling pines, saw the Three-in-a-box outfit shimmering in the heat far below, and checked their horses slightly as they negotiated the long slope.

"If the fellow on that butte didn't get the idea where we was headin', an' he came from the Three-in-a-box, we may learn somethin'," opined the man as he signaled Kenneth to slow his pace. Any horseman approaching the ranch-house would be plainly visible.

However, there was no rider in sight. The ranch buildings continued to sleep in the sunshine. The heat increased as they dropped into the cup-like depression, and a man came riding forth to meet them.

Kenneth Stewart performed an introduction.

"Mr. Foster, this is er—er——"

The man supplied the missing information.

"Mr. Action," he said.

Foster looked narrowly at him.

"Queer name," he commented.

"Ain't it," agreed the newcomer casually. "An' yuh ain't heard the funny part yet. I was twins, that is, me an' my brother were. An' the old man had sort of a sense of humor, so he called me 'Double,' an' when yuh take the name all together it's Double Action, an' that *is* funny."

PHIL FOSTER scowled.

"Comes almost being too funny."

"Yeah, don't it? The fellows kid me about it once in a while. But after they get to know me better—well, then they don't think it's funny at all."

Kenneth Stewart shifted uneasily in his saddle. He sensed that there was some strange verbal duel going on between the two men, yet was at a loss to account for it.

"Well, we ain't needin' nobody on the ranch," announced Foster with cold finality.

"Oh, I ain't lookin' for work."

"H'm, runnin' the grub lines?"

"Well, no. I wouldn't call it that—not if I was you, I wouldn't."

Foster turned his horse, started back for the ranch.

"The sheriff was out here this mornin', Kenny. He found some more evidence."

The boy's mouth turned suddenly dry. He gulped, swallowed.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, he found a leather bag that had been cut open. It's been identified as the bag that Sam Gale was carryin' the payroll in, an' he found it in the kyaks, that Bob Aley had brought in from his line ridin'."

The boy's face turned a shade whiter.

"Empty?" asked the man who had given the name of Double Action.

"Empty," snapped Foster.

"M'mmm, I see—probably savin' it for a souvenir."

Foster turned on him.

"Say, you seem to be pretty much interested in that murder."

"Yeah. The thing that makes me seem interested in it, is because I am interested."

THERE was bubbling good nature in the man's tone, but underlying that was a note of quiet finality, a subtle challenge.

Phil Foster hesitated, then suddenly sat as stiffly erect in his saddle as though he had been turned to stone.

Kenneth followed his gaze.

From the top of a ridge of hills which hemmed in the ranch headquarters a narrow column of smoke was ascending. As they watched, the smoke column broke up into puffs. Three puffs, a pause, three more puffs, a pause, two puffs. It was one of the oldest methods of signaling in the world, the old Indian method.

None of the three commented on the smoke column.

"Come on in, Action," invited Phil Foster, and his tone was suddenly cordial.

The man shook his head.

"I had intended to, but I guess now I won't. Yuh see, me an' my buddy has a little matter of business to attend to, an' I guess we'll be moseyin'."

"Oh, come on in. I've got a little firewater that'll cut the alkali off'n yore windpipe an' put hair on yore chest. Two drinks'll make yuh howl like a coyote; three drinks'll make yuh answer yoreself."

The man shook his head.

"We're ramblin'," he announced curtly, and, with that, waved his sombrero, swung the weight of his body far to one side, turned his horse in a short, spinning circle, and was off in a scattering of gravel. Behind him came Kenneth Stewart, a very much mystified youngster, and the wire-haired nondescript dog came racing at the heels of the horses, sensing somehow the subtle current of tension which was in the air, running neither to one side or the other, but holding a steady pace with nose down, as befits a dog who has many miles before him.

Half a mile from the ranch, and the man suddenly checked his horse, inspected the trail before him, and then swung from the saddle.

"Somebody sneaked out from the ranch-house while we was talkin', sonny, an' he's headin' for town as fast as hossflesh can make it."

Kenneth also dismounted and looked at the tracks.

"It's Earny Sargent," he announced positively. "I can tell the tracks of his horse anywhere. That left hind foot gets thrown a little to the outside—see, like this one here."

"M'mmmmmm, Earny Sargent, eh? All right, sonny, let's keep moseyin' an' see what sort of a reception committee's ahead."

Once more they hit the trail, and this time their pace was much faster. The man who had given his name as Double Action sat crouched in the saddle, his hand within reaching distance of his gun, his eyes scanning the trail ahead.

They were within three miles of town when a lone horseman was seen coming toward them, his horse at a wild gallop.

"Keep to one side of the trail," warned the man, as he checked his horse, turning it in the narrow trail so that the animal's neck and shoulders shielded whatever motions his right hand might make.

RAPIDLY the horseman approached. "It's Sheriff Fancher!" exclaimed Kenneth.

The sheriff pulled his horse to a lope, a trot and a walk. Some twenty feet from the waiting man he stopped the animal.

His own hands hovered near his holsters, but his eyes retained the expressionless impassivity of reflected distance.

"Yore headed in the wrong direction," he remarked, almost casually.

The other shook his head.

"We're headed the way we're goin', an' that can't be wrong."

A hint of a glitter seemed to enter the dust-colored eyes.

"I knowed yuh was wrong. Yuh ain't goin' the way yore headed."

There was an unmistakable squaring of the shoulders of the man who claimed the name of Double Action.

"I'm not only goin', but I'm gettin' ready to start," he said, and there was a deadly chill in his voice. "I hadn't knowed yuh was in with 'em, Sheriff."

Something in his tone made the officer's eyes narrow in puzzled scrutiny.

"Ain't yuh headed in to try an' stir up a lynchin' party?"

The man did not answer the question at once. After a moment he remarked.

"S'pose I was to promise not to try to harm Bob Aley in any way. Would that alter yore ideas?"

"Sure would."

"Well, I'm promisin' not to harm a hair on his head, only the bald-headed old buzzard ain't got none to harm. Anyhow, I'm goin' on in to town, an' I ain't aimin' to make no trouble for Bob Aley."

The sheriff swung to one side.

"Mistake somewheres. Yore word's good, Russell."

At the name the man swung quickly, almost fiercely in his saddle.

"My name's Action, Sheriff. Mr. D. Action."

"Yeah? What does the D. stand for?"

"Direct. Direct Action."

"M'mmm, I see. Yuh look like a man by the name o' Russell, son of old J. P. Russell that used to own the Bear Cat Mine."

"Well, looks is deceivin' a bit at times. Right now, Sheriff, yore lookin' at old man Action's son, Direct. So long."

The officer sat on his horse, regarding them with calm expressionless eyes.

"I've only got a right to protect my prisoner," he muttered, "but if what I hear's correct, the fellow's right. He's old man Action's son—an' I guess I better be moseyin' after more men. There'll be plenty of action soon."

Ahead on the trail, Kenneth Stewart spurred as nearly alongside the other horse as he could get.

"What made him think you was plannin' a necktie party for Bob Aley?"

The man half turned in his saddle.

"Son, I ain't sure just where he got all his information. But I was plannin' a necktie party for Bob Aley, and I'd have been stagin' it about now except for two things, you an' the dog."

THE boy's face flushed.

"You don't think Bob Aley's guilty?

To answer this question the other checked his horse, put a hand on the bridle rein of the boy's horse. "Son, I don't, but I did until I met you an' the dog. I don't know much about this Bob Aley. I just seen him once or twice. But you an' the dog know him, an' yuh got faith in him, an' that started me thinkin', an' when I got to thinkin' I got thinkin' of lots of things, such as why was Sam Gale tied up before his throat was cut, an' why wasn't there signs of more of a struggle there, an' why did they get so blamed many clues against this here Bob Aley an' none against anybody else. And after I got to thinkin' I got to seein' lots of things. Right now we're on the way to town to bust up any necktie party that might be organizin'."

Kenneth Stewart nodded.

"I'm like the sheriff. I'm takin' yore word for it, sir. Me an' Sandy sorta feel we can trust yuh."

The man extended his hand with a swift gesture of friendship.

"Son, you're all right. I ain't got time to go into a lot o' explanations or I would. We're workin' against time, an' there's only one way to fight, an' that's to beat

the other guy to all the punches. If you hit him first his punch ain't goin' to have no steam behind it. An' we got to hit somebody first. We just gotta stir things up an' watch 'em as they stir. That's the only way we stand any chance o' savin' Bob Aley."

Having delivered this speech while he was shaking hands, the strange man once more clapped spurs to his horse, and went down the trail at a steady gallop.

BEHIND him Kenneth Stewart puckered his forehead.

"Somehow, I feel he's on the square," he muttered, "an' I'm goin' to stay with him."

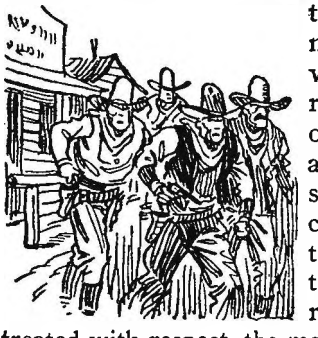
The town of Mesquite usually slumbered peacefully during the heat of the day, springing into life at night when groups of cowpunchers from the surrounding ranches came in to while away a few hours at cards. On week nights there were relatively few men present, but on Saturday nights and pay days the men congregated in larger numbers.

Now the place was packed with grim faced men, men who were bronzed by wind and sun, firm of mouth, keen and clear of eye, swift and graceful of motion. Their only awkwardness was in their legs. Cowpunchers these, men who lived in the open on horseback. And they were there for a purpose. There was none of the wild hilarity which characterized their usual gatherings. The news had spread that the murderer of Sam Gale had been caught; that one of the gang of bandits which had infested the country and made themselves a terror, had been brought to justice. These men had but little regard for the technicalities of law. They still preferred to deal with outlaws and rustlers in their own manner.

The two riders cantered down the deep dust of the main street, past the lined hitching racks on either side, and were inspected in silent appraisal. The Three-in-a-box brand on Kenneth's horse was duly noted, and here and there a voice announced its owner's recognition of Sandy, as Bob Aley's dog. In some subtle manner the men became automatically classified as friends of the prisoner, and they were viewed accordingly, with latent hostility.

At the lower end of the street a huge figure was making an impassioned talk. He was surrounded by a group of attentive men, and his fists waved in oratorical gestures as he delivered himself of his ideas.

Red Browser was a leader of the rougher element, his own occupation more or less of a mystery. Mainly, he lived by gambling, with only an occasional period of work. However, he was a forceful, easy talker, and vehement in his convictions. He was reputed to be one of the best and quickest shots in the community and to have a violent temper. As a result, he was treated with respect, the more so, as he had been a close companion of Sam Gale, the owner of the Bear Cat Mine, the man who had been so foully murdered.



As the riders came abreast of the group of men one of them made some low-voiced remark to Red Browser, who instantly ceased his oration and whirled to survey the newcomers.

"That's the dirty crook's dog!" he exclaimed, and stooped to the ground where he picked up a huge rock, one that would have staved in the ribs of the animal.

"Rock him to death, men. That'll get rid of one of the breed!"

SOME of the men started forward. Kenneth raised his voice in protest but his words were lost in a gathering chorus of mutterings, the ominous murmurings which precede a storm. The men were becoming sufficiently inflamed to do violence, and the rocking of the dog offered an easy first step.

Kenneth turned appealingly to his companion, and saw that individual swinging easily from his horse, leaving the bridle reins in the dust. The trained mount stood still while his master stepped toward the towering form of Red Browser.

"I wouldn't rock no dogs if I was you," said the man, and something in the cutting menace of his cold tones penetrated the rumble of the incipient mob, commanded attention where the protests of the boy had been swallowed up.

Sensing the hostility in the attitude of Red Browser, Sandy had squared himself to face the man, eyes glittering, teeth bared, a low, throaty growl sounding at intervals.

"Say, who are you?" demanded Red Browser, the rock dropping from his hand, the clutching fingers of which gravitated toward his belt.

"My name's Action," stated the other.

Red Browser sneered.

"Well, what's the rest of it?"

"Immediate. I'm Mrs. Action's little boy, Immediate. Immediate Action. That's me. Look at me again, Red."

And then, suddenly recognition dawned upon the incredulous face of the man. Red Browser's eyes popped opened, his mouth sagged, then twisted into an evil leer of desperate rage. His clutching fingers swooped to his holster in the swift circle of the draw.

And then, and not until then, the man who had given his name as Action exploded into action. His hand moved with a rippling rhythm of smooth motion which did not seem to be in the least strained, but was so swift that the eye could not follow. He had given Red Browser the break on the draw, and he beat him to the first shot by that infinitesimal split fraction of a second which is hardly perceptible to the ears, but which means life or death in a gun fight at close quarters.

ALTHOUGH the roars of the guns sounded to the ears of the spectators as one explosion, Red Browser was staggering backward under the impact of a forty-five slug before his fingers had squeezed the trigger on his gun.

And then Action justified the name of Immediate. He was back to his horse, in the saddle, spurring down the main street of the town, tearing along in a cloud of dust so fast that none of the dazed spectators seemed awake to the situation.

"After him!" yelled a voice.

The sound of the words galvanized the others into life, and half a dozen men ran as awkwardly as crabs toward the hitching racks.

It took a few moments to tighten cinches, to get horses untied and under way. In those few minutes the fugitive had increased his lead to the extreme range of a pistol. His horse seemed to fairly fly over the ground, showing an amazing burst of speed that easily outclassed any of the pursuing mounts.

Kenneth watched open mouthed.

"He didn't need to run. The killing was in self defense," he said, but there was no one to hear his words. The group on the board sidewalk had dissolved. Cowpunchers were galloping out into the sage-covered plain singly, by twos and threes. The town of Mesquite was once more almost deserted.

KENNETH STEWART had started out to aid Bob Aley, but had no very definite plan of action. He had been firmly convinced of his friend's innocence, yet that conviction had been the result of his faith, rather than because of any knowledge. He had started in to do something simply because inaction had been out of the question.

Now he had a definite objective before him. The sheriff must be reached, notified of the angry mob which had gathered, which had only been sidetracked from its purpose by the shooting of Red Browser and the subsequent flight of the man who had done that shooting.

Kenneth knew where they had met the sheriff, and he set out for that point, urging his horse to its best speed. It was only when he had arrived at that part of the trail, when he picked up the tracks of the sheriff's horse and saw that they were headed along the trail which led to the Three-in-a-box, that he surmised the sheriff's errand.

Apparently the officer had anticipated the situation, and had rushed to the Three-in-a-box outfit to secure special deputies to guard the jail. It would only be natural that the waddies who had ridden with Bob Aley would be anxious to see that he had a square deal. They could be depended

upon to see that the law was allowed to take its course.

However, there seemed nothing better for Kenneth to do, after he had surmised the destination of the sheriff, than to follow on and meet the posse, urging it to greater speed.

KENNETH knew he could secure a fresh horse at the Three-in-a-box, and he did not spare his mount. The sun was getting low, the shadows were taking on that purplish tinge which is characteristic of desert sunsets, and the heat was leaving the air. Kenneth bent low and spurred his mount. Sandy had dropped behind. The pace had been too great for him, but the faithful dog would follow as best he could, seeming instinctively to recognize in Kenneth Stewart a new master.

The sun was just dipping below the pine-covered ridge back of the Three-in-a-box when Kenneth saw a lone horseman, coming along the trail at a steady pace, yet at a pace which ate up the miles. While some little distance away he recognized the horse as the sheriff's animal, and was soon able to identify the rider.

The officer drew rein when he came up to Kenneth.

"Howdy, youngster. Anything doin' in town?"

Breathlessly, Kenneth described the mob, told of its attitude. The sheriff's tired eyes drifted away from the boy's eager face, circled the horizon, and then returned.

"They probably won't start anything before dark. I wanted to get some of the Three-in-a-box waddies to ride herd on the jail, but Phil Foster put his foot down on it. He says he ain't got no truck with robbers an' murderers, an' his cowpunchers ain't ridin' night herd on no jails."

Kenneth frowned angrily.

"Why, he always claimed to be a friend of Bob Aley's and to be a square shooter. That ain't no way to stand by a pard."

"Yeah, sonny, I know," muttered the sheriff, and his voice was toneless with that masked reserve which concealed his inner emotions.

"I'll bet some of the men'll come for me," volunteered Kenneth. "I'll ask 'em to quit. They ought to know Bob Aley ain't guilty. Why, he's been like a father to me. When I first hit the ranch he kept 'em from hazing me to death, an' he picked up poor old Sandy when the fellows was tyin' tin cans an' firecrackers on his tail last fourth of July. The poor dog was so scared he couldn't hardly stand up. He was shakin' all over, an' his mouth was all froth. Bob Aley made 'em quit an' he got the dog a drink an' took him home. He had to draw a gun on some of the fellows to make 'em take off the tin cans, too."

The sheriff's dusty eyes showed a glow of interest.

"Was Phil Foster there then, sonny?"

"He sure was. He was one of the fellows that was insistin' on their right to tin can the dog. He claimed it was his dog because he'd found it first."

The sheriff nodded.

"Maybe that's got somethin' to do with it," he said in his dry, almost impersonal tone. "What become of the man that was with yuh?"

Instantly Kenneth's mind reverted to the shooting, which had slipped his mind until reminded by the sheriff, so eager had he been to secure a guard for the jail.

"He's on the dodge. He shot Red Browser."

"What!"

"Yes, sir. Browser was goin' to stone the dog, an' they had an argument, an' a shootin'."

"Tell me about it." The sheriff's voice was quick with unconcealed interest, his eyes hard, intense. The veil of dusty indifference had dropped from him as a cloak.

KENNETH gave him all of the details.

"H'mmmmm," remarked the officer. "Guess I'd better be gettin' on in there. That'll stop the lynchin' for a while, unless they catch Russell, an' then there *will* be trouble."

"Russell?"

"Yeah. That's his real name. He's the son of old man Russell that located the Bear Cat mine. They say old Gale sort of slicked Russell out of it. One day Russell was found dead, an' Gale recorded an acknowledged deed to the mine—claimed he'd bought it. This fellow wasn't much more than a kid then, an' he vowed that when he found out who had killed his father he was goin' to fill him full o' lead. That's what made me anxious about him this mornin'. The same gang o' bandits has been workin' here for years, an' if Bob Aley was one of 'em young Russell would be figgerin' on leadin' a necktie party.

"The kid's changed a lot, the last few years. I wouldn't have knowed him, but Earny Sargent knew him, an' he rode in to tip me off. Didn't see Earny in town, did yuh?"

Kenneth shook his head.

"M'h'mmmmmm. Well, I gotta be goin'. You'd better go on in to the ranch an' see if yuh can do anything. Then get a fresh bronc an' hurry back. I wonder if Russell ran away just to decoy that crowd outa town. Funny the way he took up with you an' seemed to think Aley was innocent just because you thought so."

"There was two of us. Me an' Sandy," corrected Kenneth. "We both got faith in Bob Aley."

The officer's eyes surveyed Kenneth Stewart in calm appraisement.

"Yeah, that's so, sonny," and there was kindliness in the tone of the sheriff, kindliness and worry.

Kenneth tightened the bridle reins, waved his hand to the officer.

"I'll do my best," he said, then rode along the trail to the Three-in-a-box.

Despite his words of confidence, he sensed that there was trouble in store for him. By a hundred and one little things he knew that Phil Foster had no great affection for Bob Aley.

Aley was one of the quiet, dignified sort who make few friends among the boisterous element, and Phil Foster was of the opposite temperament. Ever since that fourth of July when Bob Aley had saved the dog from torment there had been an undercurrent of unspoken hostility between the men. Phil Foster was foreman and, if he chose, could forbid the men leaving the ranch. He was within his rights, and, as Kenneth was forced to admit, if he believed Bob Aley guilty, was perfectly justified in refusing to disrupt the organization of the ranch in order to make special deputies of his cowpunchers.

AS KENNETH rode, he went over the situation in his mind, and came to the conclusion that his errand would require great diplomacy. He began to realize the difficulties which confronted him, and knew that he could count upon the opposition of Phil Foster if that individual sensed his mission. Kenneth planned to enlist the sympathies of the men, get them to either make a surreptitious ride into Mesquite, or else to join with him in persuading Phil Foster to send assistance.

He realized that to come galloping up to the ranch which he had quit that morning would be to make his mission plain, to incur immediate hostility, and, perhaps, he would be ordered to leave. He felt he must have a word with one or two of the men privately, before Phil Foster knew he was on the ranch.

With that in mind, he stopped his horse some three hundred yards from the corrals, up where the creek from the mountains purled downward into the meadow, and advanced on foot, taking care to keep within the darker shadows, to tread noiselessly.

It was now quite dark, and Kenneth Stewart slipped through the sparse growth of pines and chaparral like a shadow.

Ahead of him he heard the clink of a bit chain, fancied he detected the rattle of spurs, listened, and was sure that he could hear the feet of a horse, walking slowly down the dusty trail.

Then he could hear a steady clink-clink-clink. Evidently the rider had dismounted and was going up toward the canyon country above, his spurs rattling on the gravel.

Kenneth wondered what the errand of such a man might be, felt that perhaps Phil Foster had decided to guard the trail against the men leaving the ranch; and determined to investigate.

He removed his own spurs, and stealth-

ily worked his way toward the sounds which came from the darkness. It was slow work, this trailing of another by the sound of his clinking spurs, and the necessity of avoiding noise in his own progress made it the more slow and difficult. However, Kenneth was slowly gaining on his quarry when, of a sudden, the sounds abruptly ceased. All was silence save for the trickle of the water, the faint rustling of wind through the tops of the pines.

For over a minute Kenneth listened, yet heard no sound. Puzzled, he once more worked his way cautiously toward the point where he had last heard the man he was following, determined to see it through to find out what might be the errand which took the other out in the dead of night, moving with such stealth, off the traveled trail.

Inching his way along, feeling with his feet lest he should step upon a dry branch, venturing to trust his weight upon the advanced foot only after he had explored the ground, Kenneth worked to a point where the canyon narrowed into a wall of rock.

Then, directly ahead of him, within some twenty feet of where he was standing, a light flared up, the brilliant beam of an electric hand torch.

The youngster stiffened to rigid attention. The circle of light was directed at the ground, and shone upon a pile of gleaming gold, the crisp green of stacked bank notes, yellow-backed gold certificates. And then a figure moved bulky shoulders between him and the circle of light, shut off his vision.

Someone had evidently secreted this pile of money in one of the caves in the sandstone ledge which rose above the creek, and now desired to examine the hoarded wealth. Or else, perhaps, the man was just about to hide the money. In either event the night excursion, the very hiding place of the money all indicated that there was something illegal in connection with the hoarded treasure.

Kenneth's mind flashed to the murder, the payroll robbery. He jumped at the conclusion that this was the money which had been taken from Sam Gale after he was murdered.

STRAINING every muscle, he leaned forward tensely, striving to obtain a clearer view, and, as he shifted his weight, a round stone beneath his left foot rolled out from under, brought him crashing forward, throwing out his arms in an effort to regain his balance.

Instantly the circle of light was swallowed up into inky darkness. There came a blue-red spurt of flame, the crashing report of a pistol, and a bullet whipped the shoulder of his coat.

There was only one thing to be done, and Kenneth used the momentum of his slip, to lunge straight for the location of that stabbing burst of flame.

Again there came a long streak of fire. This time the wind of the bullet fanned his cheek; and then his arms locked about a pair of knees, a form crashed down upon him, and he found himself engaged in a terrific struggle, thrashing about the scrub-oak, rolling over loose stones, even splashing in the water of the creek.

Over and over he rolled, now on top, now on the bottom. The gun had evidently been knocked from the hand of his antagonist by the impact of his tackle. Kenneth was struggling with nature's weapons, primitive, desperate. He sensed that this was no mere rough and tumble fight. This was a life and death struggle, two men armed with their bare hands, fighting as animals fight.

It dawned upon Kenneth that his youthful frame was no match for the hardened body of the other, that the extra weight of his antagonist was too great a handicap for him to overcome. He struggled gamely on, fighting to keep those clutching hands from his throat. Once they almost had their deadly grip. He tore his neck loose, crashed a punch upward, felt his arm doubled back, caught his head upon a projecting rock, winced with pain, and then real-

ized that fingers of steel had closed about his throat.

HE STRUGGLED to draw up his knees and kick outward, tried to wrench the hands loose by tugging at the other's wrists; and then, as strength was oozing from his nerves, tried to slam a blow to the face of his antagonist.

As he realized that his strength was gone, that the other was strangling him with remorseless cruelty, just as he was on the point of collapse, there came a rushing form, scattering gravel, a throaty growl, and Sandy hurtled through the air.

He had been following Kenneth by scent, taking a slower pace than that of the horse, and when he came to where Kenneth had left the trail, the dog had followed, guided by his unerring sense of smell. Then he had heard the sound of struggle, and his eyes, more nearly attuned to the darkness, had enabled him to take in the situation. He sprang directly at the throat of the strangler.

The sheer momentum of the dog jarred loose the choking hands. Life giving air rushed to Kenneth's lungs. The man above him had thrown himself backward, was tearing at the snapping jaws of the dog, and Kenneth was able to raise himself, to swing his fist with all the weight of his shoulder behind it.

IT WAS more or less of a blind blow, but it found its mark. He could feel a numbing pain in his wrist, and then the man toppled backward, crashed his head against the rocky wall, and rolled down toward the stream, the dog snapping at his throat.

Kenneth grabbed the dog, pulled him back, and saw that the man was unconscious. Something which glittered in the starlight caught his eye, and his fingers closed upon the round barrel of the electric torch, pressed the button, and took in the details of the scene.

Phil Foster lay upon the ground, limp, unconscious.

Scattered about until the entire ground seemed carpeted with bills, strewn with gold, was the missing payroll of the Bear Cat mine. A heavy six-gun lay at the edge of the creek.

Kenneth possessed himself of the gun just as Phil Foster stirred slightly, opened his eyes and blinked into the glowing bulb of the hand lamp.

"A move and I blow your head off," said Kenneth grimly, and meant every word.

Phil Foster hesitated, recognized the voice, started wheedling explanations, gathered his muscles as though to chance an attack, then desisted as there sounded running steps in the darkness, a voice raised in a hail.

"Hello there! What's the racket?"

Kenneth sighed his relief. The man who was approaching was the man whom Sheriff Fancher had said was Dub Russell, the man who had gone under the name of Action, Double Action, Direct Action, and Immediate Action. And he had started lots of action, plenty of it.

"Here I am," called Kenneth, and, a moment later found himself pouring forth explanations.

Any desperate resistance which Phil Foster might have contemplated with Kenneth, changed to cringing cowardice when he recognized the newcomer.

Grimly, efficiently, the man tied Phil Foster's hands behind his back, thrust a gun into the small of his back, and commanded him to march. The trio went back down the canyon, the torch illuminating a path; and, as they walked the man who had given the name of Action talked.

"Yes, I'm Dub Russell. I didn't want to be recognized too soon. A few of the old timers might place me, but the newcomers wouldn't. I vowed vengeance for the death of my father, and recovery of the mine.

"You fooled me for a while, Phil. At first I thought Bob Aley was the guilty party. I'd been away from the county, but close enough to it to keep track of what

was going on. I was strong for lynching Aley until the kid and the dog here gave me another slant on Aley. You see, I didn't know him very well in the old days when I was a kid.

"Well, I got to wondering why it'd be necessary to tie Sam Gale up and then cut his throat. I'd never had much use for Sam, and I'd thought he might be connected with my father's death. Then, after a bit, I saw the whole thing.

"Sam Gale was one of the gang. He was afraid suspicion was pointing his way, so he fixed it up that the gang was to rob him, leave him tied up on the road, steal the payroll, and put him in strong with the people. It'd sure be a good alibi for him, and he wouldn't be out anything.

"That was why he submitted to being tied up without a struggle. But you and Red Browser were a bunch of double-crossers, and yuh got Gale helpless, tied up, an' then yut slit his throat. That got rid of him, and gave you one less in the gang to divide up with. I reckon there must be quite a little wad o' illegal coin in the kitty by this time.

"Then when Red Browser saw me workin' along an' examinin' that fence Bob Aley had had to repair, he got suspicious and sent you a smoke signal. Yuh wanted to frame it on Bob Aley an' yuh made sure he'd have somethin' to keep him busy while the crime was bein' committed. Because Sam Gale was in on the plan you could arrange the time of that crime to a minute."

PHIL FOSTER half turned, his face working with emotion.

"All bosh!" he exclaimed. "It may sound pretty, but how yuh goin' to prove it?"

Russell touched the money which he had gathered up into a package.

"There's the payroll. I guess that proves it."

"Proves nothin'," retorted Foster. "Bob Aley hid that there. I remembered seein' him slink out this way, an' so I started out here, wonderin' if maybe he hadn't planted the money. I got to nosin' around that sandstone ledge, an' come on the coin salted in one of the caves an' then this kid jumped me, an' I thought he was a friend of Aley's tryin' to get the coin. Naturally, I fought all I could."

Kenneth Stewart could feel his heart sinking.

After all, the story was plausible, might even be true. He glanced at Russell to see if the yarn had weakened his faith in Bob Aley, realizing how deadly would be the hatred of this man if he should be convinced of Aley's guilt.

The boy could only get a glimpse of Russell's profile as it was outlined in the sidelight from the electric torch, and that glimpse showed him nothing. Russell's face was set grimly, showing no sign of how he regarded the explanation.

"I think that's a lie," ventured Kenneth.

Russell half turned.

"I'm bankin' my play on the fact that a man who has a kid an' a dog stickin' up for him ain't a crook," he said. "That's the way I started in the game, an that's the way I'm goin' to play my hand."

"Bah!" snorted Phil Foster. "You talk like a simp. If Aley ain't guilty, what'd he run for?"

"Shut up," snapped Russell. "We'll go into all that at the proper time."

The prisoner squirmed under the insulting directness of the tone, but deemed it best to obey, and resumed his march toward the ranch-house.

"I sure busted up that lynchin' party," commented Russell to the boy. "I had more horseflesh under me than that bunch o' cowpunchers ever saw, an' I took 'em all over hell's half acre an' back. They're still huntin', an' I guess we won't have to worry about no lynchin' for a while."

"Why'd yuh run away after shootin' Red?"

Russell chuckled.

"I had Red spotted as one of the outlaw gang. I had some evidence on him that would have nailed him cold. He knew it. When he saw me it was certain there'd be fireworks, and I was ready for him. If I'd stayed to explain, it'd have been all right, but the lynchers would have gone ahead with their necktie party. I started runnin' an' that gave 'em somethin' to chase—took 'em away an' kept their minds occupied.

"There were two or three things I

wanted to check over, so I started out this way after I shook the bunch, an' then I heard the pistol shots, an' come a runnin'."

KENNETH was puzzled.

"If Red was one of the outlaws, why was he so strong for a lynchin'? You'd think an outlaw would be yellin' for a fair trial."

"Yeah," remarked Russell, "he would, unless the man he wanted lynched had somethin' on him. I'm sorta hankerin' to get to the bottom of this now I've started."

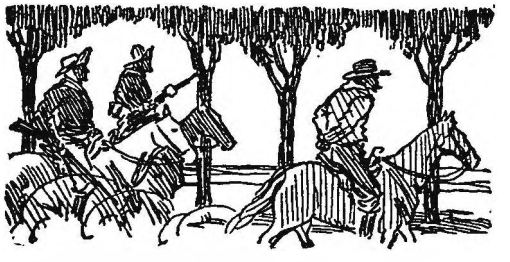
Phil Foster snorted his contempt.

"You're a couple of damn fools, both of yuh. Maybe Red was one of the crooks. I never had no particular trust for him, but any time you think Bob Aley ain't guilty you're plumb crazy."

Neither of the captors made any reply. They trudged toward the lights of the Three-in-a-box ranch in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts.

"We'll get some fresh horses at the ranch, come on back an' change saddles, turn our broncs loose, and take a ride to Mesquite," announced Dub Russell, "an' somethin' seems to tell me we ain't goin' to let no grass grow under our feet."

Kenneth marvelled at the smooth efficiency of the man. He secured fresh stock



from the ranch corrals, gave a few brief words of explanation to the cowpunchers who were in the bunkhouse, and, in an incredibly short space of time, they were once more in the saddle, tearing through the darkness at top speed on fresh horses.

Phil Foster was tied to his saddle, his mount roped to Russell's horse, and forced to travel at the pace the lead horse set. However, he raised his voice from time to time in protest at the pace, the manner in which the ropes were cutting his hands, generally trying to delay the pair.

As his purpose became more apparent, Dub Russell ceased to regard the protestations, but touched his horse with spurs and increased the headlong pace.

A good range horse has an uncanny sense of trail finding in the dark, but, even with the best of horseflesh, night travel at top speed is dangerous. However, Russell seemed to take no heed of danger and they dashed along at a gallop.

Kenneth had made a rough sling out of a sack, had anchored it to the horn of his saddle, and carried the tired dog in it, determined that the faithful animal should be in at the finish. The pace was fast and the dog unaccustomed to such riding, so the boy had his hands full in keeping the sack steady and the dog quiet. But he had fully determined that they would see it through together, Sandy and himself.

TOPPING a slight rise, they saw the scattered lights of Mesquite below them, and then a burst of firing came to their ears, the rapid staccato of pistol shots, muffled by distance. As they drew nearer there sounded an angry roar, a muttering of many voices, rising to a volume of sullen sound.

The mob was at work.

The men demanded every last bit of speed from their mounts, and dashed into the town at a wild gallop. A crowd had gathered before the jail, a crowd which was milling about with the restlessness of nervous cattle. Occasionally, one of the leaders would raise his pistol and empty it in the air, a gesture to spur on the men to an attack.

Upon the porch of the jail, a sawed-off shotgun resting across his knees, his face quiet in the calm impassivity, sat Sheriff Fancher. A gnarled forefinger caressed the trigger of the shotgun, and his patient eyes flickered casually over the milling crowd. Outlined in the lights, he presented a perfect target, coud have been shot down in an instant by any one of the forty odd men who composed the mob. Yet, despite the odds of numbers, there was an air of quiet finality about the officer that held the crowd in an invisible leash. The men milled, shouted, threatened, fired pistols, yet always they were careful to keep back a certain distance. So close they came, yet

no closer. Those in back pushed forward, those in the front ranks held back. The center constantly eddied as those in front worked their way to the back.

Over the entire gathering lay the spell of this quiet man with the sawed-off shotgun. He made no threats, offered no statements. Words were useless. The sawed-off shotgun and the waiting form told their own story.

As the three riders clattered up to the outskirts of the crowd, Dub Russell's voice snapped forth an order.

"Get to one side here. Open up a way to the courthouse."

The combined effect of the words and the momentum of the horses had the desired effect. Men scrambled about, jostling one another, fighting their way back on either side, leaving a passageway down which the men rode. Anger changed to interest, mob violence gave way to mob curiosity, and excited voices demanded the news.

AND then Dub Russell was recognized as the fugitive the men had been hunting throughout the afternoon. The pressure of the back ranks became greater than the holding power of those who gazed into that deadly shotgun. The mob wavered, the front ranks broke, and then men surged forward.

Dub Russell dropped the rope which led from Foster's horse, turned, and drew his pistol.

"Keep back, I'm surrenderin' myself," he yelled, and the words quieted the men somewhat.

"Get inside," commanded the sheriff. "What have yuh got Foster for?"

Then it was that Phil Foster raised his voice.

"Rush 'em, men. They're all part of the gang. They're trying to get inside the jail, an' rescue Bob Aley."

The words had immediate yet subtle effect. The crowd seemed to gather into one compact whole, tense, eager, almost vicious. A silence descended, the hush which comes when forces are being gathered.

Sheriff Fancher seemed somewhat undecided. He glanced from the two men to their captive, shifted his shotgun slightly, and then turned his eyes to the grim faces which were shifting closer, gradually closing the space between the mob and the jail.

It was a period of tension, needing but a single overt act to start bloodshed.

And then there came a shout from behind the packed men. Doc Herbert, the town's physician, rushed forward, shouting loudly, waving a paper.

MEN turned to listen, opened up a way and let him through.

"Red's dying," shouted the doctor. "I got the bullet out an' thought he might live but he's taken a turn for the worse. He's just signed a confession. The gang was Sam Gale, Phil Foster and Red. They framed the robbery of Gale, then cut his throat when they had him tied. Bob Aley was getting evidence on them so they framed the crime on him. It's all written and signed."

The men heard him, fell slightly back, open mouthed, wide eyed.

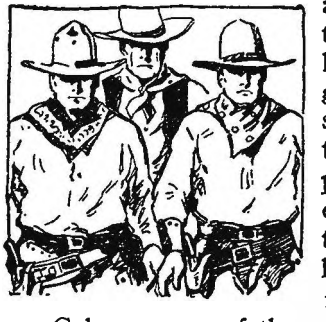
"It's a lie," asserted Phil Foster, but his white face and pale lips showed the gripping fear which clutched his soul.

Sheriff Fancher watched the men in that crowd, watched anxiously until they ceased to stare at Dub Russell, but turned, each man to his neighbor, discussing the news. Then the sheriff entered the jail, released Bob Aley and brought him to the porch.

"Now's yore time to talk," he said.

Bob Aley raised his hand.

"Men, I've been getting evidence on this gang of cut-throats for some time. It was accident that led me to suspect Phil Foster,



and I was gettin' the dope on him when they got wise. As soon as I saw the way they'd planted evidence there at the murder I knew I was in for it. You see, Gale was one of the gang, and if I'd told what I knew then it'd have looked bad

for me. My only chance was to get away and corner Red Browser, get a confession out of him. I tried it, and walked into a trap."

So far Bob Aley got, and then there was a yelping, a commotion of sound and action. Sandy, imprisoned in the sack, hearing the voice of his master, struggled mightily, tore the sack loose from the horn of the saddle, plumped to the dusty earth, broke from the sack and rushed to Bob Aley, barking wildly.

Dub Russell pointed to the dog.

"Fellows," he said, "some of you know me. I'm Dub Russell. The bandits cheated my father out of the Bear Cat mine, as part of their series of crimes. I was waiting, determined to get 'em sooner or later. Then I got evidence on Red Browser. I came back to run down the gang. At first I thought Bob Aley was guilty, but when I seen a square kid and a good dog stickin' up for him, I figgered there must be a mistake in the dope somewhere.

"Red knew me today. He was afraid I'd expose him, an' that's the why of the gun fight."

Doctor Herbert placed his hand on Dub Russell's shoulder.

"That's in here, too, Dub—a statement about how the gang got your father to sign and acknowledge a deed to the mine, a deed that was to be left in escrow. Then they murdered your father and recorded the deed. The mine's really yours——"

Anything he might have said further was lost in a terrific shout. The mob had swung the emotional gamut and a great cheer for Bob Aley rose upon the desert air.

But Bob Aley was not facing them, he had turned to Kenneth Stewart.

"Thanks, old-timer," he said huskily, while Sandy danced and barked about in an ecstasy of delight. "The sheriff told me about your faith."

"Aw shucks, 'twasn't nothin' much," muttered the boy, suddenly embarrassed, conscious of a moisture in his eyes.

"Nothin' much!" snorted Bob. "Yuh quit yore job for me."

"Yeah, I can get it back, though."

And then Dub Russell's voice entered the conversation.

"Get back hell! You're goin' to be a foreman at the Bear Cat mine. I need kids that've got guts enough to stand up for their friends. I might get arrested some time, myself."

And Russell's eyes were moist as he smacked his palm upon the lad's shoulder.

Sheriff Fancher gently pressed his arm.

"Come on, Double, Direct, Immediate Action. The boys want to hear the rest o' that speech o' your'n—an' keep 'em interested for a minute while I get Phil Foster tucked away in a cell—they still got a rope, yuh know."

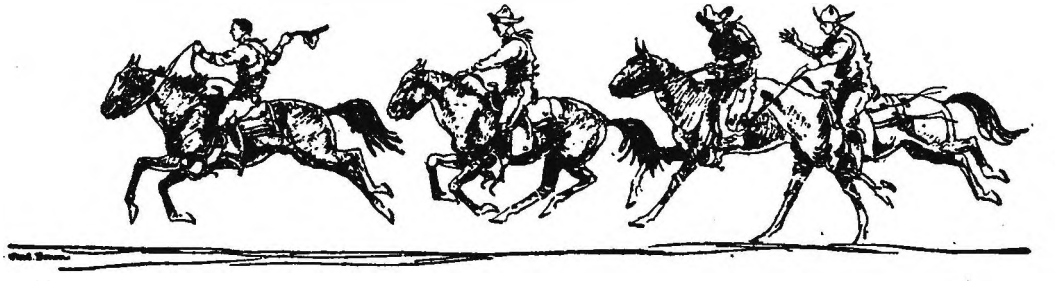
Russell nodded, turned to the cowpunchers who were watching, listening.

"Well, fellows—" he began.

"Attaboy!" came a voice from the crowd. "Here's old Action, old lady Action's little boy, Plenty. Plenty of Action. You tell 'em!"

A roar of laughter swept the crowd, and Sheriff Fancher sighed his relief. Humor is an antidote for mob violence. He locked the cowering Foster in a cell and wiped his forehead, then returned to the men on the porch, standing his shotgun in the corner against the door jamb.

"Yuh see," he said to Russell, with a dry smile, "somebody'd taken the shotgun out to hunt deer with, an' there wasn't a shell for the blamed thing in the whole jail. Naturally, I was feelin' a mite worried."



ECOLA!

By JACLAND MARMUR

THE STORY OF A MAN WHO FELT THE SPELL OF THE EAST; WHO KNEW EVERY WAVE OF THE EASTERN SEAS, YET WHO WAS TO ROAM THE ISLANDS AND THE OCEANS OF THAT VERY EAST, SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING BEYOND HIS GRASP. BEYOND IT UNTIL THE STORM THAT STRUCK THE OLD "ECOLA!" AND BROUGHT BACK TO CAPTAIN PETERS THE SPIRIT OF HIS YOUTH

I DON'T suppose any of you particularly remember her, although some of you must undoubtedly have seen her knocking about the East years ago. The barque *Ecola,* I mean. You will perhaps recall that even in those days, the days of your youth, she was already grown old and weary of many years of service in the Eastern trade. And I have no doubt that if you saw her beating her way out of Singapore against a strong northeast monsoon, her prow smothered in white foam and the seas dripping like gore from her hawse-pipes, the eyes of your youth looked at her with something like disdain, at a tired old hulk that kept stolidly on her way without a murmur of complaint or reproof, as though guided eternally by the light of an unquenchable faith. But we have grown old ourselves now, eh? And something of the fine glamor and romance of our youth has left us. We are more compassionate and we revere her age, yes, and her faithfulness.

But I, well you see, some of my earliest merchant service I saw in her and I can never quite forget her. For from her fo'c'stle head I saw the East for the first time, and on her worn, old decks I was permitted to feel something of my power and my strength. No, I do not believe that I shall ever quite forget her, the *Ecola.*

For years after she occupied my brain, took a sort of despotic possession of me, she and the men who lived with her for over five months. Peters was one of them. He too had lived with her—more than that for he had dominantly claimed her as his own. But then he had the right. No one would begrudge it him. Not even the inspectors at the inquiry. And I have always a clear vision of the smile I saw on his face at the end of that voyage, a smile inscrutable, a smile that had become eternal, that I was perhaps not deserving enough to penetrate. But that I cannot forget.

THE night before the *Ecola* sailed from Singapore, she lay quietly alongside a crude jetty which has long since fallen into decay. It has been replaced by the more pretentious and less romantic wharves of the conquering white man, who now brings his brethren—for a price—to view with widened eyes and little understanding the results of the successful invasion of the dominant race. But in those days, as some of you will undoubted-

ly recall, it bore, this ramshackle jetty, at its offshore end, shadowing the water at dusk, the sign, "Baumport & Holt, Singapore"—a sign that each night caught the last rays of the dying sun and held them for a brief moment, tense, suspended. And suddenly the sun went down, as though it had only waited to view that symbol of passing human endeavor before departing forever.

The night closed in rapidly, blotting the wharf with its background of palm-laden shore line from view more thoroughly than even the white man's invasion. Into the dark a blot of light shone from the lamp at the head of the *Ecola's* shore plank, cutting a gruesome wound of yellow upon the rude planking of the jetty of Baumport & Holt. Her gentle rise and fall to the easy swell was barely perceptible. She lay quite inanimate, her lofty masts rising silently into the night and losing themselves amongst the brilliant stars, her spars like mute arms outstretched in welcome or farewell. She answered peacefully to the restraining hold of her mooring lines. Somehow it seemed impossible to believe that she could suddenly spring to life at the word of a gray-haired old man and toil restlessly about in a troubled sea like a lost soul. Her furled canvas caught all the feeble light there was and painted grotesquely incongruous white patches on the black night. Silently, without a murmur of complaint or reproof, she welcomed to her bosom the children of the sea.

A ghastly light from her fo'c'stle cut the night and fell helpless on her deck; a yellow light thrown from a dismal subterranean passage. Smoke drifted listlessly in the beam and vanished in the dark. Muffled noises came from below—the *Ecola's* crew. Shouts that sounded low, weird, ominous, filling the entire length of the quiet, ghostlike ship. That night she seemed possessed of shadows; elusive shadows that I can never place quite properly.

The figure of a man with a square-cut beard clambered over the *Ecola's* rail amidships and wandered like a tormented ghost toward the light. On his back he supported a black sea-chest and the figure staggered under the load as though it were heavy, or the man old. For a moment he became visible in the light, a dense black silhouette that was suddenly swallowed in the darkness like an unearthly gnome. The evening breeze, passing sorrowfully through her gear aloft, sighed a weary cadence to the noise of the *Ecola's* crew. From somewhere aft came the monotonous scraping of the second's fiddle.

BARQUE ECOLA, Jameson, Master, for San Francisco, sailed daybreak. This notice of our obscure existence and departure appeared duly in the shipping journal and they had done with us. In this simple manner was their responsibility with us ended. We were ruthlessly pushed out into the roadstead, leaving behind us the dim, obscure pain of lights and laughter, of painted smiles and bad whisky, which with a sigh or a frown, were quickly forgotten. The shore line became rapidly little more than a black rim above a sea of purple. That night a solitary light still dimly winked us back beckoningly to the land that is to the seaman forever a thing of obscurity, of pain, of mystery, solved completely in the casual carouse of a single night, yet never quite understood. The squat tug had turned its back upon us as though we were unworthy of further notice and we faced our destiny.

Suddenly the *Ecola* became a thing alive.

I remember Captain Jameson standing on the poop with the steaming palm-laden shore behind him growing darker as the sun set. His eyes were glued aloft and with his head raised so to the heavens, he looked like a weary old man invoking the aid of his Lord in some hazardous undertaking. A quiet man, gray haired, with drooping moustaches, tired eyes and the weary expression of the old man who has long forgotten hope and carried on only by the steadfastness of a purpose that is undaunted because he believes it to be honorable. It seemed that by the power of his intense gaze alone, the *Ecola* was making sail. One by one the narrow bands at her yards grew and burst into a mass if impeccable white. She rolled easily until the wind caught her, steadied her, bellying her

sails. And suddenly the water gurgled under her forefoot, lapped against her tired sides and almost imperceptibly she got under way.

"Way, sir!" called the man at the wheel as she slowly answered her helm and turned her square counter to the land with her name, *Ecola,* sending back its dumb challenge and imputation, mute, imploring, defiant to the shore that had already forgotten our very existence.

THE wind held fair and the *Ecola* slowly but steadily made good on her course. And we were not impatient with her because she was slow to take advantage of the fair monsoon. She was tired, and by Jove, inspired something of respect for her age and her faithful service.

But soon she ran herself out of the fair trade and rolled heavily in a long westerly swell, her masts describing great arcs across the purple dome of an impeccable sky. We set stuns'ls alow and aloft. We crowded every inch of canvas on her that she would carry; still she barely moved through the water. The enchantment of the sea was upon her.

Well, some of you will recall and remember how the doldrums palled on ships' crews in the days when only the strong wind, the strong sinew won ports out of the mysterious immensity of sea and sky; how each anxious eye flew to windward for a sign that would show the spell broken. We washed, we painted, we hauled incessantly at the braces trying to catch a fitful stirring of air. At night under the brilliance of the stars we slept when we could, under the rails, on the coils by the fife-rail.

In the dog watches we collected on the fo'c'stle head or about the galley door, where the cook, a big black South African nigger, divulged to us the scraps of gossip he had picked up aft.

"Old man still off his feed," he would say tersely and with a great air of importance, sticking his black kinky head out of the galley door. "Taking pills—can't smoke. A long passage, that's what, mates. We'll all have the scurvy 'fore we see 'Frisco Sal' on the coast." And he'd laugh, damn him, as though it were a great joke.

Then his head would disappear and his guttural laughter was drowned in the rattle of his pans. We looked at each other and into the recesses of that galley as into a black cave from which an oracle had pronounced our death sentence. Peters got up, tamping down the remains of his pipe for future use, and muttered something under his breath as he went below with that unmistakable heavy quarter-deck tread of his that sounded like "Stuff and nonsense," and something about "Long paydays." We looked after him sheepishly, feeling cowed, for we all of us, you understand, had considerable respect for Peters and his opinions. He was the oracle of our fo'c'stle.

It was in odd moments such as these that I gathered most of his past history. It was for the most part told in whispers, with sidelong glances at the fo'c'stle ladder. But by piecing the stories together and adding what I already knew the tragedy of a life that had perhaps lasted too long, became intelligible and I came to look on him through my youthful, romantic eyes with something of reverence.

II

DURING the course of an ordinary lifetime each one of you has erred. I mean to say that you have been mistaken in judgments and the results of your errors have been sometimes momentous, sometimes of no account. The truth lies hidden in your own souls, deeply buried, almost forgotten. And you have prospered, after a fashion, each of you, in spite of them. Because, well because there is no court of inquiry to sit in judgment of your smallest miscalculation; to inquire heartlessly into the outer aspects of an error that in reality touches the very soul.

And yet, even if they had not forever damned Peters in Singapore, I doubt if he had turned out differently. He was even then entirely too imaginative, ah, excessively so. I do not believe it was the haunting

memory of the first scraping of the *Johanna P's* keel on the mud of Malacca Straits that drove him from the easy chairs of every ships' agent out there to the dingy sailors' boarding houses. No! It wasn't that, although many a ship's master will remember that sound on his death bed. Peters had lost something greater, something fundamental, long before he lost the *Johanna P* in that famous gale. He had lost his balance; call it his sense of responsibility—that inexplicable mental poise that binds us in sympathy and in pain, in joy, and in sorrow, each to his fellow man; which gives us our simple and foolish faiths in each other, in ourselves, and in our own honorableness of purpose.

Figuratively, when they had done with him in that momentous inquiry into the loss of the *Johanna P,* they had taken him from the quarterdeck of that barque and boldly thrown him into the forecastle of every ship trading amongst the Islands. And after twelve years he was still struggling in his inarticulate way to regain that mental poise so necessary to his conception of his own self respect.

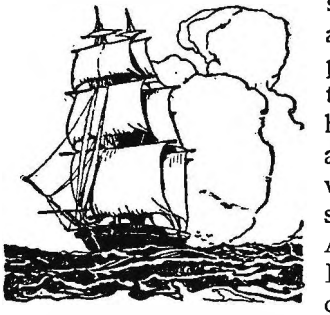
He stood for a long time in the blazing sun in front of the old Customs Building in Singapore after that inquiry that forever damned him as untrustworthy. His weather-beaten face wore a puzzled expression as though there was something about the whole proceeding that he couldn't quite grasp.

And yet so short a time as a month ago there was not a shipowner in the Islands, well and for that matter a goodly number here on the continent, who would not have been highly pleased to offer to Captain Peters their best command and been proud to have had him in their service. His fame in the East had been firmly established ever since he had come tearing up on Shanghai in the *Brilliante* with stuns'ls set alow and aloft before a southwest monsoon and a nine hundred ton cargo of coal smouldering furiously below his hatches. An official, Parkinson, you may know him, told me out there that he had been on the quay when Peters had damned his mate for a "chicken-livered, yellow scoundrel."

"Such a voice, Cap!" Parkinson told me with his hands up in the air in dismay. "More like a roaring bull's than a man's. It seems like the poor fellow, his mate, wanted him to abandon ship when the fire got serious."

Ah! He had youth then, and his faith. Nothing could touch him!

HE WAS about thirty, I should say, when he met Johanna. He had a fair sized brig then for Baumport. Baumport, the old man, I mean—before his son took charge and organized what is now Baumport & Holt. A fine upright, old man they say he was, gray-haired and fat. Had a weakness for clipper ships and good cheroots and would listen for hours to his skippers' yarns about smart passages and the like. Perhaps that had a deal to do with his being so well liked. At any rate, Peters had just come in from a very profitable voyage, and the two of them, Peters and Baumport, were talking it all over on the veranda of the Europe after dinner, the smoke of their cheroots drifting lazily about them in the breathless dusk. And when the moon topped the houses across the road and threw ghastly bars of light through the rattan curtains, they were still hard at it. There had always been a queer affection between old Baumport, they say, and Peters, ever since the old fellow had given him a command.



"You know dot barque, Capitan," Baumport was saying above the noise from the Europe's billiard room. "One dot we admore so much eight, no nine months ago? She iss for sale. I tink maybe I buy her, Peters. She do well in dis trade, eh? Vot you tink, Capitan?"

Peters grunted and pulled hard at his cigar to keep it lit.

Baumport sighed heavily as he clasped his hands over his stomach. "Iss dot all you have for antwort? I offer a thousand ton barque for command, und you grunt, hein?"

Peters' hand with its lit match was arrested in mid-air. He burned his fingers; the match dropped to the floor and glowed. He turned swiftly to his owner.

"You offer me—" he burst incredulously.

"Und vy not?" Baumport interrupted with a chuckle that set his paunch atremble. "I vos tinking, Capitan, I vos thinking, ya! Dot she make a fine ship for you the *Dolly Baxter,* eh? She carries an awful spread of canvas. Vot you tink, mine Peters?"

Peters rose suddenly out of his chair. 'The *Dolly Baxter!* Lord, wouldn't I—"

Old Baumport rose laboriously and started for the door. He stopped suddenly and turned.

"Vell, den, dot iss all settled," he interrupted slowly. Then he added, "You haff done vell by me, Capitan. I voss also tinking dot for us *James P.,* dot iss a better name als *Dolly Baxter,* a very fine ship's name. But first, maybe ve better buy before ve rename, vot?" And chuckling to himself, he lumbered slowly inside, the forefinger of his right hand stroking the side of his nose with an air of great sagacity.

JUST as Baumport disappeared at the end of the passage, two billiard balls clicked together in the billiard room of the Hotel Europe with an air of finality and the pungent odor of the tropics rushed suddenly in swirls about Peters as he stood there irresolute before this last proof of his exceeding and ascending good fortune. He turned toward the steps which led to the road, taking a last long pull at his cheroot before tossing it away.

The road, bathed in yellow light, lay before him. From where he stood he could see the roof of the old Customs Building. Beyond that lay the jetty of Baumport & Company and the brig of which he was master. He fancied he could almost see that barque there in its place, what was her name, the *Dolly Baxter.* Queer twist of the old fellow's wanting to rename her after him. His gray eyes twinkled as he descended the steps and started slowly down the road in deep thought.

He had not done so badly. The warmth of his success crept softly into the old seaman's heart and made him glad. He was still under thirty-five, yet his keen gray eyes had gazed unblinkingly into the gales of the seven seas. He had seen skies sullen in anger with the clouds scudding furious and low above the senseless fury of a tormented sea. And he had seen sea and sky as calm and limpid as the smiling face of a child. The sea he knew in all its moods and his simple heart came as close to understanding the awful mystery of it as is permitted any man.

FOUR months later, when Peters backed the tops'ls of his brig *Lurline* and came smartly to his anchorage off the jetty of Baumport & Company, the barque *Dolly Baxter,* with the Baumport house-flag whipping proudly at her main, was riding quietly on fifteen fathom of chain not over a hundred yards from him. He stood at the taffrail of his command with his stocky legs spread wide apart and admired her. Then he leaned his arms on the teak rail and squinted his gray eyes aloft to the trucks of her rakishly tilted masts, and a slow smile of pride spread over his face as he turned.

"Smart old chap, picking up that ship. Smart craft, that. Do well out here with her," he muttered to himself as he blinked toward the shore. From the jetty, old Baumport himself was coming out in the company's shore boat, a canoe manned by Malays.

The gray head of Mr. Bunnel, Peters' mate, showed at the head of the poop ladder. "All secure, sir," he called, and his head bobbed down again out of sight.

"Fine! I say, there, Mr. Bunnel, come up here a moment, please." Peters spread his legs and waited for his mate. "Not likely to work cargo tonight, eh, Mister?"

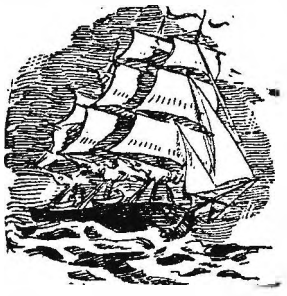
"No, sir, hardly. Have everything handy for tomorrow, though."

Peters grunted. "What do you think of her?" he asked with that slow smile on his face as he waved a hairy arm at the *Dolly Baxter* and turned to admire her once more.

Bunnel was almost fifty. Poor chap. As fine a seaman as ever there was. Some fellows are just that way. They never seem

able to get on. And he looked at the *Dolly* with the weary eyes of the man who has been in the Eastern trade for over fifteen years. Fifteen years! And never the sight of a command.

"Isn't she a beauty!" he sighed. His eyes roved aloft, taking in instinctively every detail of her gear.



"A handy ship, eh, sir? I'll bet she can handle an awful spread of rags. Why, she doesn't — w h y she's flying the Baumport f l a g, sir." Peters nodded. "Bought her. Sails for Baumport now. I'm to have her soon as she's ready for sea."

Bunnel turned, and without a word earnestly clasped the hand of his captain in congratulation. They shook hands there on the poop of Peters' brig, the master and his mate who somehow had never got on. And when they looked into each other's eyes for that brief second, there magically vanished all distinction in the memory of the many times they both, on that very deck, had together peered with anxious eyes into the teeth of a raging southeaster, their hearts pounding each time the gallant craft heeled over, helping her with their prayers and with all their skill.

Bunnel looked at the *Dolly Baxter* wistfully again for a second as he murmured, "Have to be getting 'midships, sir. Mr. Baumport is coming aboard."

PETERS looked after him. A fine mate. Then he slowly followed him to where old Baumport was painfully clambering up the *Lurline's* accommodation ladder with many a short winded grunt. He had planted his legs firmly on the deck and heaved an immense sigh of relief before he let go the helping hand of Bunnel. Just as Peters came up, the figure of a thin, emaciated chap in the dirtiest drill suit in the East sidled past in pursuit of the mate who was already gone forward about his work. Baumport finally recovered his breath sufficiently to remove his topee and mop the perspiration from his forehead and smooth back the immense crop of white hair that prospered above his jovial face. He shook Peters' hand warmly.

"Gud evening, gud evening. I vos not looking for you yet for a veek. A smart passage, Capitan."

"Fine weather, fine weather, Mr. Baumport. Come into the cabin, eh?" And they went toward the poop with Baumport leaning heavily on Peters' arm.

"Fine vetter, eh? Und maybe nice ship sailing, too, vot?" he chuckled to himself as though it were a great joke.

Captain Peters shrugged his huge shoulders slightly. Fine ship sailing was his business, his art. He accepted it as a matter of course. For that he expected no praise, but he was pleased.

"Vell, now, you see her?" Baumport was saying at the break of the poop. "The *Dolly Baxter?* She iss ours. Maybe vun more voyage mit dis liddle ship, Capitan. Diss liddle ship I luff, you know dot, Peters? Small und smart. V-vell, but dot's not vot I voss saying. Next voyage und maybe you take out the *Dolly*. Und ven ve haf blenty cargo, ve giff dis brig to Mr. Bunnel." He turned, "You hear?" he shouted. "You hear, Mr. Mate, eh? I say maybe ve half ship for you soon."

But Bunnel had not heard, for he was deep in some controversy with the apparition in dirty drill, the fellow who had sidled aboard behind Baumport in pursuit of the mate. The chap was gesticulating so wildly that it seemed a matter of moments only before he must surely rap his flail-like arms upon the foremast and do himself serious damage. Bunnel seemed to be listening, with a weary look on his face, occasionally nodding his white head impatiently, for he was a good mate and anxious to be about his work.

Suddenly he nodded once again, this time vigorously and with an air of finality. His lips opened in some remark as he turned on his heel. The apparition followed close behind, his arms still flying about wildly. The fellow had evidently essayed at shaving in honor of the brig's return and had gashed his face horribly. His head was covered by an old battered straw hat, one side of which was completely missing and it gave him a queer

lopsided appearance as he earnestly exhorted the mate's back about something or other. He was impossible, unreal, and you expected that at any moment he would vanish from the decks. Finally, in the intensity of his discourse, he stumbled over a coil of line and fell heavily to the deck, his long legs tangled in the ropes and waving ludicrously in the air.

BAUMPORT was chuckling softly to himself as they watched, his stomach moving convulsively in his mirth. Peters stared dumbfounded.

"What the deuce do you call that?" he finally burst out.

Baumport turned and still chuckling to himself, they descended into the brig's cabin, where he offered an explanation of a sort.

"Dot, mine gut friend und Capitan, vas James Algernon Tyson. *Ein dumkopff ist er,* 'Lord Tyson' iss he called ven he iss drunk, which iss most of the time. You know him not, Capitan? Himmel!" The old man grew suddenly serious. "You know vot? Sometimes I feel sad for dot man. He has live too long. Much too long, Capitan. Dot iss a thing of terror, Capitan, too long to live."

Peters looked at Baumport pensively from under his bushy brows, as he sat down opposite his owner in the little cabin that was his castle, his cheeks cupped in the palms of his hands, his elbows resting on the deal table. In the shadowy light of the swing lamps above their heads, the shadow of his pointed beard fell on the table like an index finger pointing straight at the heart of Baumport.

"He lives here, Baumport?"

"Tyson? Ya. Singapore Road. Und a daughter, Johanna."

Peters leaned back and sighed, "English?"

Baumport nodded. "It iss said dot he married a Malay woman, Capitan. She ran away—died—no one knows." He shrugged his shoulders. "The daughter, Johanna, she iss fair. Maybe he iss dead if not for her." He broke off and leaned forward, as though about to impart some information of the greatest secrecy, while the index finger of his right hand stroked the side of his nose in that quaint gesture of his. "Woman can be the beginning, the beginning—or the end. Eh, Capitan?"

A long sigh, like a lonesome soul troubled in sleep by some dream of vague longing came to them from above as the night breeze passed sorrowfully through the brig's rigging. Then came several sharp, distinct taps as the first drops of rain fell on the deck, like the solitary hoof-beats of the leaders in a cavalry charge. Then the steady drum of the sunset shower passing overhead. The two men sat and listened as though entranced, to the voice of the East and the tropics. Peters sighed again.

"I get lonesome, Baumport, sitting here and listening to that," he said slowly and looked up at the deck over his head. "Gets a chap started on silly dreams, I guess—"

Baumport nodded his head slowly, implying that he understood—understood well. "Ya, Capitan, ya," he said quietly.

Peters laughed and stroked the table with his palm. "I'm getting old, Baumport. Shall we go up to the hotel? The shower'll be almost over now." He rose. "When a man gets foolish over a bit of rain out here this time of the year, he's getting old," he added. "Getting old, Baumport."

"Old? *Gott, nein,*" replied Baumport as he too rose. "You haff too much sentimentality. Too romantic. Dot iss all."

There you have it. By Jove, I believe old Baumport was right at that.

AS THEY were being rowed ashore, Mr. Bunnel watched their boat from the deck of the *Lurline* till it became a blur on the night and merged with the greater shadow of the jetty. The last gust of the evening breeze passed swiftly over his head, carrying with it a dense squall of rain as though in pursuit of Baumport and Peters. It seemed to overtake them even as Bunnel watched, and obscured them completely from his vision as though canoe, men, and jetty had suddenly all been mysteriously swallowed. He turned and wearily climbed the poop ladder.

Several hours later, when Peters came aboard, he found his mate still seated on the cabin skylight on the poop of the brig, his pipe unlit between his teeth.

"Well, Mr. Bunnel, a fine night, eh?" Peters said, as he sat down next to his mate. "Everything shipshape?"

"Aye, sir, nicely."

"Had quite a day of it, what? I fancied you'd have turned in long ago."

"Oh, just having a bit of a quiet smoke and think all to myself. Am tired, though," he added, but remained seated.

Peters nodded, and they were silent for a time.

"Baumport wanted to tell you, Bunnel, that you're to have the brig when I take out the *Dolly Baxter*. He's renaming her the *James P.* I'm glad to bring the good news."

You would imagine that after twenty-five odd years of patient, obscure endeavor such news would be greeted with some show of enthusiasm, eh? But men who have silently faced their destiny in the utter loneliness of sea and sky, with only their souls for companion, meet good fortune as stolidly, and a low "Thank you, sir," was Bunnel's answer. It was all that was required, as though with these few words the tardy reward for a lifetime of lonely labor had been sufficiently dealt with. He looked dreamily over the taffrail of the brig that was destined to be his first command.

"By the way, what the deuce did that queer fellow want of you this evening? Baumport told me he said he had urgent business aboard. Said he'd swim out if he wasn't brought. I think he's off, myself."

"Oh! That Tyson fellow," the mate answered abstractedly. "Says we have a consignment for him. Something he got for that daughter of his, he said. Must be damned valuable the way he carried on about it. Wonder if he wanted me to open the hatches for him personally so he could see it safe. Worried to death. The devil knows what it is! Case of rum for himself, most likely."

"Queer! Seems to think a deuce of a lot about that daughter of his, eh?"

"Aye, that he does, sir, even when he's drunk. Maybe I ought to say even when he's sober. I guess she's all that keeps him going. Reminds me of the old woman, somehow, Johanna does. Quiet like. But gives me the creeps sometimes with those dull eyes of hers. Makes you sort of feel there's something going on inside she doesn't even know about herself."

"You know her, Bunnel?"

"Know her? Well, no. But I guess most everyone out here knows about them—a little. Mother ran off—or died or something, no one can quite get that. Bit of a mystery. Whatever it was, it got Tyson all right. Not much account. Queer, how a woman can upset some men thataway. Wonder how it would hit me?"

THE two men stared astern silently at the few lights that still blinked ashore, as though they were both trying to solve that enigmatical problem. On the fo'c'stle head the anchor watch struck eight bells, startling them from their reverie. Bunnel sighed and rose, stretching his arms above his head.

"Think I'll turn in."

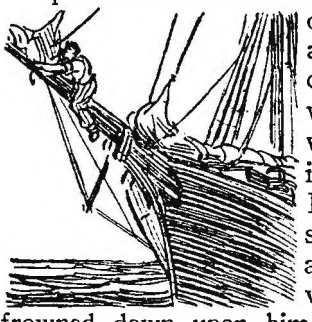
"Aye. I'll be going below, too, shortly. Give me a call in the morning, eh? Good night, mister."

"Good night, sir. Lighters will be alongside early."

Peters nodded and listened to the heavy footfalls of his mate retreating down the cabin cuddy. He fancied he heard a deep sigh as Bunnel tugged at his boots, then a slight splashing of water and all was quiet. Whether he dreamed luxuriantly of the brig that was to be his first command, I cannot say, but Peters, as he looked over the rail at the *Dolly Baxter* riding easily to the swell with her anchor lights winking intimately at him, felt the infinite loneliness of his calling.

There is something in the very proximity of land, you know, something mysteriously terrible in the termination of a voyage that brings powerfully to the surface of the seaman, all that he has of awful unrest; of inexplicable dissatisfaction; of human longing for things indescribable and vague. He is completely lost. He has lost the balance so wearily won from long lonely days upon the wastes of the seas,

where he is concerned so completely with the safety of his ship and her proper navigation. And suddenly he finds himself dumped into an alien world whose people



dash madly about in an incomprehensible way, and he wonders what it is all about. Aye! I fancy it seemed to Peters as though the very hills frowned down upon him as a rank intruder who had no business there.

But the anchor lights of the *Dolly Baxter* continued strangely to wink at him, intimately, as though they understood, and he found in them something of a solace for his troubled soul.

Peters was the third generation of a line of seafaring folk. Over seventy faithful years of service had they given, and a record of undaunted courage and fearlessness, in spite of the rumors that his grandfather had been a swashbuckling half pirate skipper on the China Coast years ago. That was quite all right in those days, you know. It added something of prestige and seemed in keeping with the spirit that had made Peters stand stolidly on the poop of the *Brilliante* in his youth with those quiet gray eyes aflame, as he crowded her with canvas while a nine hundred ton cargo of coal smouldered ominously beneath his decks. You would have thought him a man with a whole destiny in his keeping, eh? Yet all that faithfulness, all that sublime egoism if you will, served only to bring a senseless cargo to its port of destination.

Peters stroked his pointed beard now on the poop of his brig and ruminated on it. It seemed strange, almost impossible, that it had been he who in his youth bellowed so fiercely at his mate on the quay out there before he strode off unconcerned. He had reached that line of shadow, you see, when a man suddenly pauses to discover that in the flash of a second his youth has flown. The susceptible age! He shook his great head sadly and muttered to himself,

"Must be getting old—"

III

WHEN Peters opened his eyes the next morning he glanced instinctively at the compass fastened over his head and sat suddenly straight up in his bunk, startled at the ridiculous course it indicated. Then he remembered that his brig was riding safely to her anchors in the roadstead in Singapore Bay. He rose and breakfasted alone in the little cabin. The patter of bare feet on the deck of his brig and the weary groaning of his windlass that drifted down to him from forward told him that Mr. Bunnel was already at work on the cargo. "Good mate," he thought to himself as he drank his coffee.

A thin, shrill voice drifted down to him through the skylight, arresting in mid air the hand that was in the act of returning to the table its coffee cup. He listened, an air of utter disbelief and amazement spreading over his face. A woman's voice from the poop of his brig? Impossible! He set down his cup and looked up at the skylight. And as though in answer to his silent query, the voice started again, shrill, almost commanding and yet with a slight tremor of plaintiveness. Undoubtedly a woman's voice.

"Now, father," it called pleadingly, "can't you see you are only in the way? Please come away from there. It's all right. Don't you hear me? Oh, dear—" It trailed off in a deep sigh.

That was altogether ridiculous, impossible. Some wench come dallying about the ship and men at work. How in the devil did Bunnel ever let her aboard? He rose angrily, napkin in one hand, knife in the other, and planted himself quickly and solidly on the deck of his ship. There he stared in amazement, as though he had suddenly beheld a vision, something he was loathe to believe. He remained transfixed, afraid to move for fear of dissolving the spell. Beneath his pointed beard, his shirt collar was open and with knife and napkin still in his hands, he must have cut quite an incongruous and ludicrous figure there on the poop of the smartest brig in the East, staring down at Johanna Tyson as though she were some outlandish animal

he had heard of but never really expected to find actually existent.

There she sat on a coil of line in a gingham dress, for all the world as though she were on the veranda of her own shabby house on Singapore Road, and called sadly again to Tyson in that weary voice that didn't really expect to be obeyed.

"Father, won't you please come away from there and let things be?" She sighed again and picked up a flimsy bit of white from her lap and went on with her needlework.

Tyson, still in the same suit of dirty drill and the battered straw hat, stood at the break of the poop waving long and remarkably active arms wildly about as a huge packing case slowly came into view above the square of the hatch below him. What an outlandish, garish two to find their way onto the poop of such a smart craft. Peters stared.

"Daddy, there isn't a bit of use you shouting away there. It will get home quite safely without that," Johanna remarked quietly again, without so much as glancing up as though she knew very well just where her father was.

HE WHIRLED toward her for a second, "I tell you, Joh, they haven't a bit of sense. They—" He broke off and dashed madly for the rail again and bending far over, shouted down fiercely and anxiously to the men on the lighter, "Careful down there, chaps. Careful, I say, damn it all! That's a precious bit you have there. Only one ever brought— Careful, I say!" he ended in an agonized shriek. He hung silently over the rail now, Johanna sighed wearily.

The quiet of the morning was disturbed by the groaning of the windlass and the noise of the men on the lighter, Bunnel was standing by the open hatch, shouting into the hold through cupped hands. The *Lurline* rode gently to her anchors. The strip of water that separated the brig from the jetty and the land lay calm and motionless without so much as a ripple disturbing its placid surface. Two men were standing on the jetty and from the deck of the brig they looked like two insignificant specks, gesticulating senselessly like mannequins. The eastery sky was blood red above the Custom Building. From its roof a naked flagstaff stuck up into the sky-line like a bloody lance.

Suddenly the arc of the rising sun appeared above the roof of the building and sent a flash of blinding light straight at Peters' brig. The world was once more in the grip of that blinding, cruel heat. The light struck on the top of Johanna's bowed head, and the jet black hair accentuated strongly the strange pallor of her olive face. Somewhat angular, the face, although the lips had a strange fullness and the chin a sharp, determined tilt. She suddenly became aware of Peters watching her and raised her eyes to his. Dull brown they were, a peculiar dullness that made Peters suddenly recall what Bunnell had said, "Almost as though there were something going on inside her that even she didn't know about." She looked at him quietly for a moment and then raised a hand to her bosom, as though she had suddenly been startled.

"You must be Captain Peters," she said very calmly.

Peters started toward her, raising his hand to stroke his beard. He was startlingly reminded of the napkin and knife he still held in his hands. He stuck the knife hastily in his pocket, blew his nose in the napkin, and suddenly thrust it quickly after the knife. He scowled and tugged at his beard.

"Yes, I am Captain Peters." And he scowled again, for he could think of nothing else to say. His anger had mysteriously vanished.

SHE rose before him and he saw that she was tall, with a grace of movement, a litheness, that made him think of something savage. As they stood there silently facing each other for a brief second before the first hot, blinding rays of the tropic sun, Peters felt queerly uncomfortable.

And before the perfect calm of her gaze for the first time on the deck of his ship he felt helpless. He shifted his eyes as though the reflection of the sun from the calm surface of the roadstead blinded him. She was speaking again, and the voice, so calm and unhurried, still gave one the impression that at any moment it must crack under the stress of some terrible, concealed passion. Yet the words she spoke were commonplace enough.

"Father insisted, Captain, on coming aboard. He is so terribly afraid they will damage that pianoforte of mine—"

"Piano?" Peters exclaimed, as though the idea of it, a piano in Singapore, struck him as remarkable, altogether grotesque.

"Yes. Father had it brought out for me."

"You—you play—it?" Peters asked in unbelief.

"I learned a bit from—from mother." Peters looked at her, at the hesitation. "So," she went on slowly, "I thought I had better come along to—sort of—"

"To sort of look after him, eh, Miss Tyson?" Peters interposed gently. She looked up at him gratefully and nodded.

"I do hope you don't mind, Captain—coming up here and taking possession as though—as though we had the—the right."

"Why, that's perfectly all right, Miss Tyson, perfectly all right."

Tyson had left the rail and now stood between them looking from one to the other with those baleful eyes of his from beneath the brim of his battered straw hat. He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his wrinkled drill trousers. Johanna took his arm.

"This is my father, Captain Peters," she said, and Peters was aware of the note of challenge in her voice.

Tyson bowed slightly, somewhat haughtily, with a touch of old world hauteur. It was altogether ridiculous, I fancy, there on the poop of the brig amidst the din of the natives shouting at one another, and the groaning of the ship's gear as the cargo came out of her holds.

Can you imagine him, you who are safe in your Western respectability with all sorts of civilized safeguards to keep you from going wrong? Can you imagine this lanky, shrivelled man, who looked like some bizarre, animated scarecrow clad in a battered straw and a dirty suit of white, as he stood in the waist of Peters' long boat, going ashore with his daughter and that quiet skipper of an Island trading brig? Can you imagine him when he first landed in the East? For it fazed one to believe that he had ever been anything but so. There was a sheet of water like glass, that mercilessly reflected the blinding rays of the sun that hung in the heavens like a ball of molten metal above the jetty of Baumport & Company; there were the long sheds that served as warehouses, with the coolies chasing senselessly about and disappearing suddenly into the darkness of their interiors. And straight before you stretched Singapore Road, ghostlike and oppressive in the glaring, blinding sun with only the shadow of the old Custom Building thrown across it, carelessly wavering in the heat waves. Even the cocoanut palms along the shore road were dwarfed to insignificance.

It seemed that all that had been there for ever so long and would endure, just as it was, for eternity. Even the brig seemed doomed forever to lie there in that fairway of molten copper. And you took it for granted that Tyson had been what he then was since time immemorable—a part of the decaying but enduring tropical wilderness.

AND yet, years ago, he had stepped ashore from the boat of a trading schooner dressed in immaculate white, a cork helmet on his fair young head. He had come in search of—well, what was it he had been in search of? Romance, I suppose, for he was in the glamor of youth. And I have no doubt he had thrilled at the sight of old Singapore, had breathed deeply of that dull, sweet, heavy odor of the East and the tropics. Ah! The illusions of youth!

And it got him. The same as it gets most of them after the first thrill of the strange outlandishness is gone. Oh, yes! I know! It takes a long time to break down the culture of Occidental civilization. But you haven't anything tangible to contend with. Damn it all! That's the worst of it.

It's not the lure of vice. Most of us can make that out all right. But here, listen! You're out there without anything real to grab hold of. And the dark, dank jungle pressing in on you. The beginning of all things—and the horrible dread and the

dull apathy of it all! A man's heart breaks out there first. Then the illusion's gone. Youth is gone! Well——

He married a half breed girl. They say she was rather beautiful. But what happened to her no one seemed to know. And Tyson took again to his whisky and sodas, lived the devil knows how, and cared for nothing much but his billiards at the Europe and his daughter Johanna. And there he was in the long boat, waving his lanky arms about and asking Captain Peters out to his house for dinner.

Well, there you are. White men, the dominant race after all, never quite get over something of their heritage. Poor devil! He was only trying to be respectable again for a spell.

Peters said yes, he'd go, and thanked them both. He stared after them for a moment as they walked together up the road, then he turned, disappeared on the gloom of one of the sheds and sought out old Baumport in his sanctum.

OH, HE went to dine at old Tyson's that night all right enough. He deserted old Baumport in his "holy of holies" at the end of one of those long sheds by the waterfront. There was no sign on the glass panel of that door from behind which you sometimes heard the clinking of glasses and the jargon of the seven seas, not even the ominous word "Private." But it was sacred, and none but the elect traders and successful skippers ever stepped into the shadows that seemed forever to hover in its mysterious interior.

Aye! Peters abandoned him there in the dusk before his immense teak desk, where he sat like the ancient ruler of some world of shadows, the bowsprit of a model clipper ship extending like a slim finger over his leonine head while he discoursed in his low, rich voice of the ship he would some day build. "Along dose lines," with an abstract wave of the hand toward the model.

Peters left him there and went out into the night. A stray breath of wind still rustled idly amongst the palms. The shower had laid low the stifling heat of the day and the dust of Singapore Road that lay stretched before him like a ghostly road of destiny in the quickly gathering dusk. The breath of the East rushed quietly in invisible swirls about him. Polaris appeared, suddenly brilliant in the impeccable heavens and looked sightlessly down upon him as Peters walked slowly to "dinner at the Tysons'."

IV

BEFORE the small wood gate that feebly attempted to seclude the house from the vulgarity of Singapore Road, Peters stopped to stroke that small pointed beard of his. The house was one of those crude attempts at Western comfort that the earliest Dutch traders had built and was set quite a bit back off the road. Very few of them are still standing. They have long since given way and been replaced by those fakirs' booths you all know so well, where every creed and color under the sun eke out a precarious livelihood by shady transactions with gullible tourists. What had been a lawn of one sort or another had fought a hopeless battle with weeds of every description that flourished even to the foot of the veranda steps and threatened to invade even the narrow footpath that wound like a ghostly thread from the gate to the house. An immense banyan flourished gloomily in front of the house and the creepers stretching down from its branches seemed like so many crooked fingers reaching down avariciously at the small decaying structure.

Peters opened the gate and picked his way along the path. Tyson came out, seeming somehow to have appeared mysteriously out of the gloom and shouted a sacrilegious, "Welcome, Captain," into the jungle-like quiet. Then he led Peters into the living room, captured his hat, and

pointed with great pride to a small pianoforte that had usurped a corner of the large room.

"There, sir," he said proudly, "is the only piano in Singapore. And I thank you, Captain, for bringing her here safely. Would have broken my heart if anything had happened to it. Bound up with it, you know." He laughed nervously and seemed to be considering going over and caressing the thing that stood there with its row of glistening ivory keys looking dumbly up at him. No one knew the sacrifices the thing had cost him. But he went on talking, leading the way through a door at the rear of the house into a sort of court at the back. "Come out here, Captain. We generally dine out here. Cooler, you know. A bit cosy, don't you think?"

Peters nodded and looked about him. Between the trunks of two immense cocoanut palms whose tops disappeared into the night, a roof of galvanized sheeting had been erected the length of the yard. The light of an oil lamp fell on a table beneath it set for three with a glistening bottle of whisky and syphon of soda in the center. The breeze rustled the palm fronds as Johanna appeared from what Peters supposed would be a kitchen.

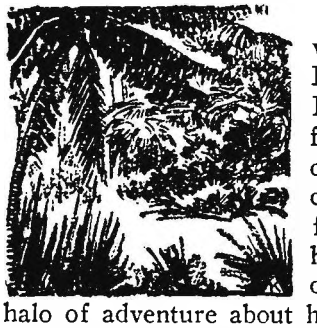
She went up to him in that determined way of hers and said quietly, "I'm glad you came, Captain." Almost as though she hadn't really believed he would.

"I'm glad too, Miss Tyson," he answered.

She looked quickly up at him and seemed about to say something of the greatest import, but it was only, "I'll be out in just a moment, Captain. Won't you sit down?" And she was gone.

Peters looked after her for a moment and then allowed himself to be led to an old fashioned rocker, while Tyson set the tall tumbler tinkling musically as he mixed whisky and soda and imagined himself once more in some smart continental café.

PETERS went through the evening like a little child that has gently been led by the hand into a strange wonderful land of mystery that has utterly enthralled him. But Tyson was in his glory. At last he had an audience, a white man to whom he could unburden himself. A white man *must* understand. Ah! How he talked, and drank whisky and sodas without number. The more he drank, the more he talked. All the bitterness a white man's soul is capable of, a white man who had lost his heritage, he poured out at Peters and the death-like quiet of the Eastern night, while from the perfect blue of the heavens a million sparkling points of light looked benevolently down upon him in silence. Only the palm-fronds overhead whispered mockingly to each other of the man's silly foolishness.



Johanna too was in the thrall. For to her Peters, a seafarer, was a man of mystery who came unheralded from places heard as in dreams, with a halo of adventure about him.

"Ah, but it must be wonderful, Captain," she said to him across the table after the fish and rice and chutney had been consumed, "it must be wonderful. You don't know how lucky you are, moving about. Things to do. Things to see." She sighed. "It's just as dad says, we die of loneliness and ennui here."

Peters lit his cheroot and looked at her. That was a new angle. He hadn't ever thought of it in that light. Sailing the sea was his means of bread-winning. He had been reared to it, and if it satisfied vaguer desires it was beyond him to express it.

"It's mighty lonesome out there too sometimes, Miss Johanna," he said staring fixedly into the night as though he were trying to pierce the gloom of a wind swept sea. "And the things we see—why, there's nothing remarkable about them. They're all the same. It's not so alluring as all that, Joha—Miss Johanna."

Tyson set down his tumbler heavily and set the glasses tinkling.

"Not so alluring?" he set in ponderously. "I suppose our prospects are mighty fine, eh?" He spoke heavily with the affected dignity of a great sage, picking his words carefully as though afraid of them. His face was flushed and his baleful eyes

fixed intently on Peters as he punctuated his words with his long, skinny fingers. "Mighty fine, eh?" he went on vindictively. "What have we got?" Then he shifted himself. "What have I got? What have I got after thirty years in this cursed hole that's only fit for niggers and Chinamen. A fine place for a white man! By God! You know I *am* a white man!" He struck the table with his fist positively and the dishes danced. He swept rapidly on, afraid of interruption. "A fine place to raise a girl like Johanna, what? What do I get for thirty years of hard work—hard work, I tell you! I can't even get away. Can't get her away to where she belongs. Me! A white man—one of the first out here. The first, I tell you! Yes, damn it! That's what I get! That's what I get!"

He broke off in a sob and stared at the oil lamp that hung to a rafter supporting the sheet roof over their heads. But his eyes soon fell, as though the glare of even that imperfect light were too much for him. He turned suddenly to Peters, confidentially, and spoke low and huskily, winking a heavy lid in intimate confidence.

"But I have my plans. Oh, I'm not a fool. I have my schemes. Little sloop—trade amongst the Islands. Back home—back home soon—Johanna and me." He nodded his head vigorously. "Mustn't say—mustn't say anything 'bout it though, Cap'n. You—you're a sheafarin' man, you—you'll undershtan'! A white man an' a sheafarin' man, ee? Undershtan'?"

HE LOOKED up at the light again as though wondering whether he hadn't said too much and nodded his head deciding it was all right. Then he got up unsteadily and moved toward the rocker, into which he fell heavily, waving his arm magnanimously at Peters and the table.

"If you wanna go inside—hear Johanna play, why 'sall right with me, Cap'n, perfectly a'right." He leaned his head wearily against the back of his chair and again waved vaguely at them.

And as though to put the seal of finality on the man's drunken and foolish aspirations, an overripe cocoanut from the palms overhead crashed suddenly down upon the galvanized sheeting of the roof, with a whang like the crack of doom. Tyson raised his bloodshot eyes slowly and waved a trembling hand, as though he realized it was a matter of small moment. His white head fell on his chest. He slept.

Johanna looked at Peters across the table from under her brows in mute apology. Peters felt intimate with her already. They had something in common—this tragedy laid so blatantly bare before them in the back yard of a Singapore hut beneath the dull light of a smoky oil lamp. It seemed to him that for all her pride and savagery, she needed protection, warmth for her soul, if you will. Perhaps it was only the reflection of his own need, eh? Queer, you will say, what? Well, look back to the time of your own youth. Your own virginity of soul, I suppose I must call it. Wasn't it just such a look that enthralled you? That made you lay all your young youth, all your clean passion and longings that had nothing of desire in them, at her feet? Consider! Dig deep into the recesses of your heart where these memories are kept eternally holy against even your own prurient gaze, and perhaps you will understand. For didn't you murmur, even as Peters:

"Johanna, I understand."

They went into the living room, she and Peters, and she played hymns and music of one sort or another while Peters sat with his eyes half closed, his chin cupped in the palm of his right hand and dreamed all sorts of impossible dreams. Well, it was wonderful to him, you know, as he watched her awkward fingers on the keys and saw the play of emotion on the savage, enigmatic, olive face that seemed hiding some terrible passion. The full lips trembled slightly and the round curve of her bosom rose and fell spasmodically, like the offshore swell of a sea that has lately been troubled by great gales.

V

WELL, that was the beginning of the story of Peters' love. But then his whole story is woven about the story of his love, just as is the life of each of us. For each life is but a story of love or hate. And according to our capacities and our deserts, we find in life the measure of love

or hate that we have offered. Those of us who also, like Peters, have paid tribute to the mysterious mistress of the sea and that gypsy vagrancy for which we pay in unremitted toil in the obscure, lonely places of the world where the great gales hold sway, we will perhaps understand the intensity of the passion of this middleaged, quiet sort of man, who like us found his work and his reward in things intangible, transient, unsatisfying; in a few stolen moments ashore; in the passing thrill of a breaking lee shore skilfully eluded; in the gray dawn breaking over a sullen rock-bound shore.

Oh, she had him right properly enthralled all right. And what it was that so captivated him, no one, of course, can say. Possibly it was the mysterious suggestion of savagery in her carriage, or the perfect curve of her rounded bosom, or the mass of jet black hair above the olive brow. No one can say. She was to him a symbol of peace attained; a promise of that mysterious delight the trade winds whisper of and which had so long eluded him. And he clung to it with all the fervor of a romantic soul that was otherwise expressionless.

And Johanna? Well, Johanna was then twenty-nine and no one, before Peters, had offered her adoration. She used to sit, in her younger days, beneath the sheet roof in the back yard of their decaying house long after her father was asleep noisily inside dreaming the silly dreams of youth. From there, you know, you could hear the futile beating of the surf, and the idle whisperings of the night breeze among the palm fronds. They spoke to her youthful girl-mind of perilous adventure, of mysterious and terrible happiness, and of the great love that would of course come to her. Out of the night he would come, must come, to capture her completely, like the inexorable hand of doom. And she would yield with all the passion of her savage nature. She shrank back into herself, away from the sordidness of her existence and built even about the unsatisfactory stories of her mother, a dream of great passion and wonderful joy.

But she was just the daughter of "Old Lord Tyson," you understand, and no one came to make love to her. Gradually, she forgot. She was half way Malay, you see, and I suppose the mixture had somehow built about Captain Peters a web of romanticism, the poor dregs of her youthful dreaming. She thought it quite fine, I fancy, to be loved by a sea captain. For the men of the sea must have something of the Viking in them, something terribly courageous. Well, how many of us are there who have not been forced to compromise the realities of our later existence with the dreams of our youth? Aye! To weave, even as she did, a web of glorious lies about the reality so that the compromise seems not only tolerable, but desirable.

PETERS gave to her all that he had of loyalty and adoration, worshipped her at a distance, as though she were a goddess who had cast some strange spell upon him that he was loath to break by so little as touching her. Peculiar that two such widely separated natures with such diverging needs should come to each other. You wouldn't have believed that this quiet skipper of an Island brig, who was now making love to Johanna in his quiet way, was the one they used to call "Crazy Jimmy Peters," in his youth on the China coast not so many years since. He had left his youth out there. Out there in the *Brilliante* and the *Lucille B.*, and the skys'l yarder *Condore*. But, by Jove, he now retained that simplicity that you meet up with only occasionally now in the seamen of the old school. His perfect gray eyes looked openly at you from his weather browned face simply, like a child's. I tell you he was remarkable!

IT WAS now only a day or so before his brig would be ready for sea. For Bunnel, at last a voyage back home and the "old woman." To Peters his ship had always been his home. A right proper child of the sea, with no heart-breaking ties ashore. And now for the first time, he felt

that ache that told him when he put to sea he was leaving home, leaving behind all the tenderness of the woman he loved. It would be a lonely voyage indeed.

That night he had Johanna aboard for dinner in the little cabin that shone like a toy shop from the steward's efforts. It gave him the illusion of possession, I imagine, an illusion of the things he was dreaming would be in the days to come, you know. He stroked his beard and looked at her across the deal table, watching the dying light through the port play on her jet black hair and smooth, olive skin. Oh, he was a romantic old fellow, no doubt, and he used to sit till all hours of the morning up there on his poop with the stars and the anchor lights of the *Dolly Baxter* for companions, feasting on his happiness and pondering on his exceeding good fortune.

He took her ashore after that memorable dinner, in his jolly-boat, and they sat on the decaying steps of Tyson's veranda and looked at one another, talking of the senseless and sacred things lovers speak of. Tyson was long since gone to the Europe, where he was by that time no doubt discoursing vehemently upon his grievances, and waving his skinny arms above the billiard table under those lurid, smoky lamps, the equal of which I have seen no where else. And the habitues were no doubt listening and winking slyly at each other.

Down by the jetty, two coolies had evidently imbibed too freely of their *saki* and their screechy voices, raised in some outlandish song, drifted up the road on the wings of the evening breeze as democratically as though it had been the evening hymn from the mission chapel. The song ended abruptly in a wail and a screech, leaving only the rustle of the palms and the mysterious whisper of the wind as it passed through the long grasses. In the dim light of the crescent moon, they might have been the shades of two lovers of a past day sitting there in the ghostly light beneath the impeccable Eastern sky strewn with stars in such lavish carelessness.

Peters was in a deuce of a mess. There he was, ready for sea in a day or two, on a voyage that would take him away for possibly seven months or more, and the happiness of his dreams eluding him because he didn't for the life of him know what the devil to say to her. He wasn't on the poop of his brig now, you know. And he couldn't shout out to the fo'c'stle his bellowing, "Let go!" and follow it with, "Forty fathom in the water, Mr. Bunnel," and go below with his task completed. Here was a situation totally foreign to him. All that was obviously impossible. And as he thought it all over, puzzling it out with his face all wrinkled and his hand on his pointed beard, he found himself startled at the quiet savagery of Johanna's voice. She was talking about her mother, he gathered. Peters didn't understand all that. It was too much for him altogether.

"No," she was saying fiercely. "No, he never speaks to me of her"—meaning old Tyson—"and I certainly have the right to know."

A sudden silence fell upon them.

"You'd think she did something terrible," Johanna finally continued with that note of strange challenge in her quiet voice. "I remember her vaguely; everyone here has some nasty rumor to whisper behind my back. Do they think I am altogether blind?" That mixture of Malay and white had given her, I fancy, an outlet that left many things incomprehensible to her half savage nature. She smiled at Peters strangely, as he stared at her flushed face. "Oh, I know. She ran off with some one. Everyone has something to say about it. Well, what if she did?" She stopped and stared dully at the hanging creepers of the gloomy banyan that swayed drunkenly in the light breeze.

"Do you suppose I care anything about that, Johanna?" Peters asked her quietly. And added, "I understand."

"No," she interrupted. "You do not understand. How could you understand?"

Peters was silent. Johanna stared off into the night as though fascinated by the swaying of the tall weeds before them. Then she burst out passionately.

"I'd do the same thing for myself! For the man I loved, I'd run away into hell!"

A CLOUD passed over her face and a queer light came into her dull eyes as though that something Bunnel had spoken

of had suddenly burst its bonds and flashed to the surface. Then it was gone, like a squall that passes swiftly before a fresh breeze, and she smiled at Peters.

The perfect quiet of the night, the clear, star-strewn heaven, and the limpid opalescence of the moonlight gave the queer illusion of cold, and in the silence that followed her outbreak they sat like two frozen images under the ghostly shadows of the old banyan. And that Peters took what she said as referring to himself is proof enough that he didn't really understand. How peculiarly silly we all are, once taken away from that sphere that recognizes our dominance, our authority. He took her small hands between both his own that looked so immense in contrast, and blundered on with what he had to say.

"I'll be gone for almost seven months this trip, Johanna. Perhaps longer. But when I get back I'm to go master of the *Dolly Baxter*. You've seen her in the roadstead? She's a fine ship, Johanna. I haven't done so badly. I've a good bit tucked away and the chances are it won't be long before I can have a good berth ashore with old Baumport, if I've a mind to ask him." He paused and peered out at Singapore Road that lay like a bright ribbon in the moonlight. He cleared his throat suddenly. Johanna stared straight at the banyan tree.

"I've been deucedly happy, knowing you, Johanna," he went on. "And when I sail in the *Dolly* will you—will you—Oh, devil take it, Johanna, will you come with me? I want you to marry me, girl." He paused before he added, "We could take good care of your father, Joh."

Well, he had it out, at any rate, and I've no doubt he felt pretty much relieved. But I wonder what passed through Johanna's mind in the few moments of absolute silence that followed. I wonder if a vision of her youthful dream-lover flashed suddenly brilliant before her? What enigmatic longing, what despair, what joy those seconds yielded! But for her alone. Inscrutable they, the only unsullied things ever left the most of us—our dreams.

Passively she nodded her head and whispered, "Yes, dear."

Peters took her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth in a moment of intoxication such as he had never known before. It was his first love, his first love of the flesh. What matter that he was rapidly approaching middle age, yes, and even wore a beard. We have but one virginity to lose, all of us. And where we lose that, there we leave a part of our hearts sealed forever. Aye! We are even afraid to peer into that holy sepulchure ourselves, for it holds the corpse of our youth.

VI

WHEN Peters came out of the Custom Building after clearing his ship, old Tyson plucked him by the sleeve—had evidently been waiting there for him—and invited him into the Europe for a drink. As the old Chinaman pushed a glass of bitters across the bar to Peters and the eternal whisky and soda to Tyson, the fellow turned and winked at Peters before he drank.

"Isn't it customary in matters of that kind," he mumbled, "to speak to the father too, Captain?" And he nudged him with his spear-like elbow as though they were old cronies. He winked again, "Ah, but I understand, Captain, and I'm proud. Yes, sir, proud. Well, good luck, Captain. You know we shall be waiting anxiously for you, Johanna and I. Good luck."

He held out his hand, which Peters took with a slow smile. Then Tyson disappeared in the billiard room. Peters paid for the drinks.

As he went out on his way to Baumport's office on the jetty, Wong, the waiter, stared after him and shook his Oriental head in amazement. At least I imagine it was the closest he ever got to an expression of amazement. To think of a man of Captain "Pleter's" standing consorting with such trash. An incomprehensible lot, these whites!

Peters walked into the old man's sanctum with the air of a schoolboy on a holiday and sat down in one of the wicker chairs. When he said quite calmly that he

had thought of a much better name for the *Dolly Baxter* than the *James P.* the old man looked up from his inspection of the polished teak desk top. He let the chin of his immense white head fall on his chest, and looked at his captain and friend from under his brows with a questioning look in those clear, placid eyes of his.

"Johanna P.," Peters said simply. Wasn't that a tribute, eh? To youth, and romance, and adventure?

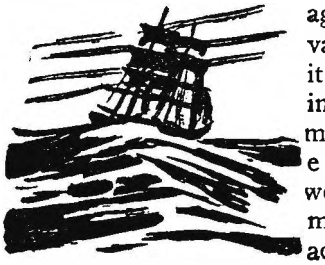
Baumport stroked the side of his nose with the forefinger of his right hand in that quaint gesture of his that implied so much of understanding and sagacity, and inspected minutely the fingertips of his other hand as he smiled his paternal smile and nodded gravely.

"Women und ships," he murmured softly. "Women und ships, Capitan. The fairest things on earth und sea, eh?"

So Peters went to sea that evening on the turn of the tide, in the smartest Island brig afloat, with the Baumport house-flag whipping proudly at her main truck and a myriad native craft swarming about her low, lean hull like a swan with a lot of ugly ducklings about her. They shook out her tops'ls, and the sun hovering on the western board as though loath to set, caught them and painted them a fiery crimson. From trucks to water line, the brig seemed a golden ship of fire. It was the greatest moment of Peters' life.

WHEN I tell you that the brig *Lurline* was gone from Singapore for over seven months, it evokes not so much as a sympathetic raising of the eyebrows. You sit there calmly in your chair with your feet stretched out, puffing at your pipe and waiting patiently for me to continue. And yet I imagine it was the longest seven months of Peters' life. I can fancy seeing him, on his poop, pacing in a fury of impatience from skylight to taffrail, puffing his cheroots beneath his spanker boom and nursing his silly, virgin dreams of joy and felicity, while the *Lurline* drove swiftly to the fair northern ports, for some, the fair ports of home. Her riding lights danced joyously over the broken, phosphorescent southern sea, a bubble of frothing brine singing eternally about her fair mouth as her lovely bows drove swiftly eastward. Two hundred and twenty days were they gone, out in the immensity of sea and sky, out in the awful loneliness and the mysterious, terrible lure that is so beyond explaining.

Long after the last voyage of the *Ecola* I ran into Bunnel, his mate, and he told me as we spoke of it that he had never seen a ship so mercilessly driven before. Where was it we bumped into each other again. In Havana. Yes, that's it. At the Plaza, in Havana, almost at the other end of the world. He smiled mistfully at me across the table.



"By Jove, Captain," he said to me reminiscently, "I like to hold on sail myself." He shook his head as he murmured on, "But that voyage, he—by God, sir, he must have been a holy terror in' his younger days out on the China coast!" He shook his head again.

He asked me out to his ship for dinner and introduced me to the "old woman." And when we sat on his poop under the awning and over our cigars, with a bottle of his fine whisky on the deck at our feet, he told me what else he knew of the whole affair. A fine, likable old fellow, Bunnel, and as fine a skipper as he had been a mate. I was glad he had finally got on.

EACH night before he turned in, Peters looked over a bundle of music he had collected for Johanna. He had an image of her, you know, at that old pianoforte, and he thought it quite fine. And somehow, there had strayed into his hands a nocturne or two of Chopin's music that her awkward fingers could have mastered no more than his own. There was even a sonata of Beethoven's. Fancy!

He came tearing back into the roadstead some seven months later like a mad Dutchman, almost tearing the sticks out of the *Lurline's* lean hull as he put her in irons and came up to his anchorage at dusk. There was the *Dolly Baxter,* waiting for him, her new skipper, and as he looked,

the last rays of the dying sun fell full on the bright new scroll work on her stern, *Johanna P.* The supreme moment of his life! And even as he looked, the sun went out.

It wasn't the bulky figure of old Baumport that came up the accommodation ladder of the *Lurline* and over her sparkling teak rail that voyage. Poor old fellow, he never again was to step on her sturdy decks, assisted by the courteous, waiting hand of Bunnel. Well, that's the way of things. It can't be helped. The ships you and I knew, the tall lovely clippers, are gone; the men we know, sturdy and as trustworthy, they too are gone. Even our own youth has somehow slipped by us, and it too has vanished. All we may do now is sigh, and look back and remember, imagining the "heat of the fire from the glow of the embers." Ah, well, no matter—

It was Karl, the old man's son, who stepped aboard that evening to greet Peters and welcome him home. You know him, Karl? Lean, thin lipped, efficient, the antithesis of his stout, jolly forebear. He it was, you will recall, who organized what is now Baumport & Holt, and they have sent their flag over the world and spread their sway over the entire East. He came onto the *Lurline's* decks that night with that unmistakable arrogance of tread that says so clearly that the man is interested only in what is beneath your ship's hatchcovers, that arrogant tread of vanity that makes of the sturdiest ship's decks little more than a boardwalk by some fashionable sea resort. Small wonder that those proud ships decayed so rapidly in port. Karl spoke rapidly.

"Good evening, Captain Peters. Mr. Baumport, my father, asked me to say he is sorry he could not come out. He feels ill, I'm afraid. He will see you tomorrow, I presume?"

Peters looked at him for a moment, pulling quietly at his cheroot. I don't think he fancied the young fellow much.

"Yes, certainly," he answered at length. "If you will be so good as to wait a moment, I'll go ashore with you, eh?" He turned back toward the poop for that bundle of music he had in his cabin. "Don't bother to send the boat for me, Mr. Bunnel," he said to his mate in passing. "I'll stop ashore tonight."

Still sublimely confident of his good fortune! Can you imagine him being rowed ashore in the dusk of a perfect, tropic night, going to meet his destiny with a singing in his soul, and a bundle of Chopin and Beethoven music tucked securely under his arm as his offering of love?

THE boat was made fast to the jetty; the boatmen hurried off, arguing noisily amongst themselves. Young Baumport said good night, and striding off, was soon lost in the impenetrable shadows of the long, low sheds from the gloom of which the guttural voices of the arguing boatmen still drifted back to Peters alone now in the night on the crude wharf. The heavy, sensuous odor of the East hung as though poised, watchful, sentient in the dark moonless universe, breathing portentous and mysterious omens. For a moment he stood there motionless in the shadows of the warehouse with the palm fronds rustling steadily above him. He turned toward the roadstead where the anchor lights of the *Lurline* and the *Johanna P.* moved fitfully up and down like troubled, bodyless ghosts. Behind him, beneath the star-strewn opalescent heavens, Singapore Road lost itself in the gloom.

How inscrutable the soul of man! I wonder what passed through his brain in those few moments as he stood there, irresolute, at the peak of his ascending and exceeding good fortune? In those few moments before he turned and strode up the road toward the materialization of all his hope, of all his faith—that night when he was to take peace and joy for bride?

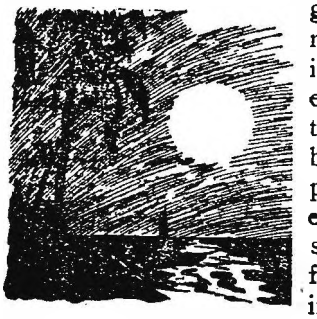
At the rickety gate that isolated the overgrown path of Tyson's home from the road, he paused and looked into the gloom. The path, leading from where he stood to the veranda, was now almost obliterated, as though it had given up the hopeless struggle with the long grasses and weeds that the breeze rustled and set to whispering in vainglorious pride of their conquest. A smoky lamp hung from a rafter of the veranda. The dilapidated rattans were up

and the light winked at him through the thick creepers of the old banyan tree like a mocking spirit. From Malay Street there came to him the muffled, drunken song of sailors on a lark. And suddenly an ominous feeling of unutterable dread took possession of Peters as he walked slowly up to the sombre looking, silent house and stood on the porch on the topmost veranda step. The gate that he had forgotten to latch creaked dismally behind him on its rusted hinges. Before him a calico curtain hung in the doorway that led into the dark interior of the dwelling and with the breeze it swayed gently backward and forward as though mockingly inviting him into the deserted interior.

A COCOANUT fell with a resounding thud on the corrugated roofing in the back yard and the noise echoed weirdly about him. He started and hitched his shoulders. A dish and a dirty tumbler on the table at his side tinkled musically for a second as though annoyed at his presence. Then all was silent, the deathlike quiet hanging heavy and sentient about him. He stood there irresolute, a nameless dread swiftly taking possession of him. The breeze sighed through the old banyan and rustled the weeds in the court behind him.

"Well?" a voice spoke behind him, a dull, low voice that had nothing but sorrow and resignation in it, "Well?" it said. Peters whirled about.

Unkempt, with hair wildly dishevelled and bloated, drunken face, Tyson stood below him at the foot of the veranda steps, his skinny arms straight at his sides. He swayed slightly, as though the light breeze were playing capriciously with his lean, piteous form. He stood there, suddenly materialized out of the gloom, a spirit of evil to torment Peters. The stars hung low in the impeccable, purple sky, so low that the roof of the house seemed lost in their midst. The drunken song of the sailors from Malay Street still drifted to them out of the night, joined now by the shrill, incoherent voice of a woman. And the sickening, sweet odor of the East and the tropics came with it on the wings of the evening breeze. It breathed to youth of



glorious romance, of sweet illusions, of high endeavor; and to age of naught but sorrow and pain. For several minutes they stood silently facing each other in the oppressive quiet of the black night.

"Where is she?" Peters asked finally, and their voices sounded hollow, like spirits conversing in a deserted graveyard.

"It is done," Tyson answered with a frozen passiveness, still swaying slowly back and forth like a reed in a breeze.

"Done? What is done? Where is she?"

"It is done," Tyson said again, repeating a formula by rote. And with that, he turned his head—only his head—and spat bitterly into the weeds. Peters stared at him.

"What is done, you drunken fool. Where is she?"

Tyson did not move. He stared fixedly before him as though he did not see Peters, as though he were looking straight through him at some fascinating sight inside the house. But his voice, when he spoke again, was bitter as brine and fell like drops of powerful poison into the night.

"Fool?" he asked slowly. "What is done?" And he laughed. Bitterly and loudly he laughed his reply, a mirthless laugh that crept into the dirty, deserted corners of the house, into the gloom presided over by the banyan, and echoed and reechoed about them in the yard till it seemed that laugh had taken up a permanent dwelling there and would live forever lurking, ready to burst out again at any moment, mocking, bitter, caustic. In the midst of that horrible laughter he stopped, and his voice rose instead, loud and shrill.

"What is done, eh? She is gone, I tell you, gone! Disappeared! Vanished! Ran off like her mother before her!" He spat into the weeds again in a horrible gesture of loathing, his face twisted in his passion. "Tu Tamasi comes to her! A native! A Malay! In pearls and finery. He looks at

her. He whispers to her. He crooks his little finger and she is gone! Gone! Gone, I tell you, like her mother before her! What am I to her? What am I beside this heathen, this Malay from the jungle? May she—!"

A shadow passed over Peters' face as he listened, like the dense, black typhoon clouds that mass swiftly to windward on the China coast. The bundle of music fell from under his arm and the sheets lay spread in confusion on the floor. Peters' immense hands trembled at his sides for a moment. He saw nothing. He reached out blindly and his hands closed violently about Tyson's throat.

"Where is she?" he bellowed, shaking the miserable body before him while his voice resounded again and again like a roll of thunder above them. "Where is she?"

SUDDENLY he pushed the wretch violently away, as though he realized the futility of it all and sent Tyson reeling against the trunk of the old banyan, clutching frantically at its creepers, while Peters strode wildly away into the night. Tyson staggered up the veranda steps, the branches of the tree reaching after him like eager, frantic fingers. He stood on the topmost step, his back slightly bent, beneath the lamp that swayed peacefully back and forth. And with his feet mercilessly tramping a Chopin nocturne and a Beethoven sonata, he shrieked wildly and fiercely into the darkness after the back of Peters, already lost in the night.

"Fool! Idiot! What is it you have lost? Idiot! What have *you* lost? A miserable woman! For a guinea I'll buy a dozen for a week on Malay Street! *My hopes!* The work of twenty years. The work and hope of twenty years. Now I'll rot here. *Rot, I say!*"

The glass fell in a crash from the table. He beat his chest with his fist and tore open the shirt at his throat. Then he fell heavily into the chair, buried his head in his hands on the table and sobbed loudly, his shoulders heaving convulsively.

The crumpled, dirty copy of a Beethoven sonata stared mildly up at the swaying, smoky oil lamp, while above the rim of the sea a blood red moon quietly rose and peacefully started its ascent of the heavens.

VII

OLD BAUMPORT sat amongst the shadows of his office, his chin resting on his chest, studying intently the polished surface of his desk top. The snowy whiteness of the hair about his temples was accentuated by a black scarf that he wore wound about his massive throat. His great leonine head and shoulders seemed to catch all the stray shafts of light that wandered helplessly about the dim interior of the room. The door opened and closed softly and without looking up, Baumport knew that Peters stood before him. When he raised his head, with those perfect blue eyes filled now with so much sorrow and looked at the haggard face of his friend and the master of his ship, it was evident immediately that he knew, and that he understood.

He remained silent for a moment and then said, "The barque iss ready for sea, Capitan, as soon as you can ship a full crew." Out of understanding he did not mention the *Johanna P.* by name.

Peters looked at him and answered quietly, "I will take her to sea tomorrow."

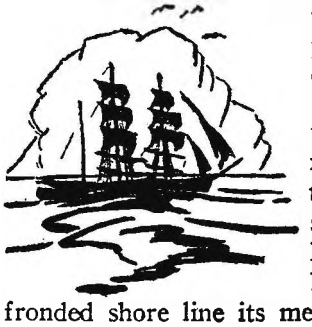
"My son vill give you your papers und sailing orders, mine friend. I feel not so well lately, Capitan."

Silently, across the top of the teak desk, they shook hands and Peters went quickly out of the room, leaving the old shipowner alone with his memories of seventy odd years of living. I have no doubt the foibles and follies of his own youth passed again through his brain as he sat there. I suppose he recalled vividly the night he had first spoken to Peters on the veranda of the Europe and taken him under his wing. He pondered on the folly of so much human pain and sadly raised his dimming eyes to that model clipper ship he was going to some day build, as though he were suddenly impressed with the futility of even so small an aspiration.

And which of you will say whether Johanna acted wisely or not? Who will condemn her? Certainly not I. For after all, what had Peters to offer her latent

savage nature beside this dashing Malay pagan, who came to her out of a night strewn with stars, in fierce finery and with the flash of youth and passion in his savage eyes? I doubt if she even paused to consider him, Peters. Tamasi came to her with the glamor and the romantic halo of youth and desire about him, breathing in whispers of mysterious, savage pleasures. And even as Tyson said, he had but beckoned to her and she had walked calmly into his arms. Oh, I know. And I suppose you are right when you say that a year later she was probably beaten into nothing but an ugly old hag cooking a pot of rice and fish in his court while he went foraging his world for newer booty. And I say it doesn't matter, for she had answered the call of her kind. No, it doesn't matter much—

Peters took the *Johanna P.* out before a fitful land breeze. She threw her counter high up to the blazing noonday sky as she rose and dipped to the ground swell. And



until she disappeared, hull down on the horizon, as though in jeering mockery, the brilliant new scroll work on her stern threw back to the palm fronded shore line its message of human folly—*Johanna P.!*

What had he lost, Peters? Tyson had shrieked that question after him into the night, you will recall; had shrieked that passionate, enigmatic query in pursuit of his retreating figure as though he had hurled some demon in pursuit of him. Well, what *had* he lost? Youth, illusion, glamor and sweet pain, and that faith and hope which binds each of us so inexorably to the morrow and so painfully to the yesterday. He had lost that inexplicable faith we all of us build so tortuously, that belief in ourselves and in our fellow men without which our silly trials and futile endeavors become so meaningless, so utterly useless. Aye, that was it!

And in that terrible gale, when the wind howled through the *Johanna P.'s* running gear like a fury of tormented souls, and the gale-lashed seas and spume swept her decks from stem to stern, he stood stonily on her poop and peered calmly into the hell of a northwest gale as though through the lashing spray that stung his face he were gazing blissfully on the face of the bride of his youth. She drove on a reef in Malacca Straits and he lost her, too, with her new gilt name, *Johanna P.*, blazing its defiance to the swirling seas.

BUT he had lost something greater, I say, something fundamental, long before he lost her in Malacca Straits. Call it his balance, if you will, his sense of responsibility, that inexplicable mental poise which bind us in sympathy and in pain, in joy and in sorrow, each to his fellow man and which gives us our foolish faiths in ourselves, in each other, and in our own honorableness of purpose.

His whole world was suddenly collapsed beneath his feet, like the fragile houses children build of small wooden blocks. And life gives no warning. A man's greatest trial comes so, in the moment of his greatest weakness, yet judgment is rendered and verdict passed on that single moment. How many of you are there who haven't gone through an entire life without ever having to face that single second? How then can you pass judgment?

But they weren't much interested in all that at the inquiry in the old Customs building in Singapore, you understand. They weren't much interested in a loss of faith, or youth. They wanted concretely to know why he had allowed his command to tear out her bottom on the reefs on Malacca Straits. They wanted concretely to know why he had lost the *Johanna P.* A simple matter, eh? But he couldn't tell them. No. How the deuce could he? They were inquiring into the outer aspects of a tragedy that went to a man's very soul. And, you know, they weren't interested in souls. They were interested in ships.

He went about with a peculiar, dazed expression in his clear, gray eyes, as though there were something about the whole proceeding he couldn't quite understand; as though all his harassed soul wanted was just to be left alone with his own problem.

And the only one in the world who would probably have understood, old Baumport, was dead; had passed quietly away in his chair in that mysterous office by the jetty, his black shawl wound about his throat and his eyes set fixedly on that model of his clipper, as though even in death he had found it hard to relinquish the passion of his old age.

He answered their questions one way or the other as though he were quite a disinterested party, as though something of much greater import were occupying his brain. And when they stamped "Cancelled" on his certificate and handed it back to him, he accepted it and thrust it back into the pocket of his drill coat as though it were quite an ordinary matter and went out into the blinding sun in front of the Custom building as though nothing of very great importance had happened. Well, as a matter of fact, as far as Peters was concerned, nothing of importance *had* happened. Not then. They hadn't anything to do with it. It was a matter of his own, for his own brain to settle. I don't believe it had mattered very much one way or the other, if they hadn't revoked his certificate. But they had their official way, and they were done with him. Well, for that matter, so was everyone else. But even that wasn't of very great importance.

He wandered by force of habit to the Europe, and sought the seclusion of a corner of the veranda. There, in one of the rattan chairs, his straw hat on the floor at his feet, he smoked his cheroots and drank his bitter cup to the dregs. But he wasn't safe, even there, for the blinding sunlight sought him out in shafts that fell through the slits in the rattan curtains as though he weren't entitled to even so small a refuge. And I tell you, it wasn't the faithlessness of Johanna. No, nor the loss of his command. When they damned him in the old Customs building as forever untrustworthy, it was for him merely something abstract, you understand. It was himself, himself, he had to answer to. And he was afraid. Afraid, I tell you! His faith was gone, his universe in ruins at his feet. He was afraid in his own soul, that he was perhaps now really untrustworthy.

The sun sank, ablaze in a pool of blood. Its light vanished from across Peter's face. His cigar end glowed and faded and glowed again in the dark. The evening breeze sprang up and fitfully swished amongst the palms of Singapore Road, rustled the rattan curtains of the Europe's veranda as though impatient with this solitary intruder. Dishes clattered in the dining-room behind him and out into the dark came the musical clicking of billiard balls. The coolies from the jetty of Baumport & Company were arguing noisily in high pitched, screechy voices, as they hurried home to their rice and fish. Darkness fell swiftly upon a universe that seemed lit now only by the fitful glowing of Peters' cheroot end.

Tyson sought him out there at the Europe. Sought him out, as though they two were partners, compatriots in some hideous, monstrous crime that even the pitying night would not shield them from. He squatted silently at Peters' feet, his legs drawn up beneath him like some bizarre, impossible, oriental god come paradoxically to worship at Peters' feet. His hair had grown perceptibly grayer, and the deep rings under his bloodshot eyes, the hard lines stamped indelibly on his bloated face, told only too well that his whisky and soda debauches had but little helped him to forget. The Chinaman stuck his head out of the dining room door, and even his phlegmatic, Oriental mind must have received a shock at the odd pair, for he shook his head wisely, and as suddenly disappeared as though jerked back into the gloom by some unseen powerful hand.

"We have much in common now, Captain," murmured Tyson, his lean body swaying sideways slightly so that it seemed his body were too immaterial to withstand even the light evening breeze.

"We have nothing in common, sir," Peters answered quietly, without even looking down at him. He threw away the

stump of his cheroot. It glowed for a moment where it fell and then went out, as though the last star in all the heavens had suddenly fallen and been extinguished.

Tyson squatted silently for some time, pondering this denial of their common lot, before he went on in a voice grown excessively weary and listless. He had much rather have been in the billiard room with a whisky and soda, than out here on the veranda.

"There is still a way out," he finally whispered hoarsely.

"A way out?" Peters asked puzzled, but without stirring.

"Yes, Captain, a way out for the both of us, you and I." He clasped his knees nervously and fiercely in the eagerness of his suppressed excitement.

"What the devil are you talking about?" Peters answered impatiently, for he didn't quite understand this dilemma Tyson was so anxious to extricate them both from.

Tyson raised his skinny form to its feet, his legs spread to steady himself. His bleared eyes glistened and his voice rose in passion as he spoke of this last means of winning back to his heritage. He took it for granted that they were both on common ground now and he went on hurriedly expounding his foolish aspirations of an old age of affluence amongst his own kind.

"You remember, Captain, before she—before you went away?" He spoke rapidly, as though he had had it all memorized. "I told you something—something of a little ship? I told you because I knew you could be trusted, because you're a white man and I knew you'd understand. Eh? Little schooner in the trade here amongst the Islands, you remember? Rubber and tin. Good trade, that, Captain, and just the ship. Lots of money in it. You know that. I don't have to tell you. Soon we could tell the whole pack of 'em to go plumb to hell. Go back home. Live like white men ought. Just the ship, Captain. She's out—"

His arms suddenly stopped their wild gyrations and he looked fixedly at Peters with those awful eyes of his, as Peters broke in on him.

"Well, what about it? What the devil do you want of me? Out with it!"

"What about it?" Tyson continued excitedly. "What about it! I tell you I've got her—got my eyes on her. Little schooner lying at Samarand. Get her for a song. I tell you, man, it will make us rich in a year. I—"

"Us? No."

"No?" Tyson swept on in a fever of despair. "Why not, eh? Why not? We go quietly and buy her, and before anybody knows anything about it we're rich and away. Hasn't that Raust devil been at it for years? I tell you I know! I know, Peters, I know. You're a man can be trusted. You go, skipper. Then I and a few Malays, that's all. You think it makes any difference to me about inquiries—down there?" He waved an arm wildly toward the Custom building, and it hung there in its pointing attitude like a finger of doom as Peters sprang to his feet and thundered:

"No!"

He strode off the veranda and before he disappeared in the night, Tyson turned and hurled his verdict at his back vanishing in the gloom. While his body swayed in his fierce passion and his skinny arms shook outstretched into the night, he hurled once more his verdict like a pursuing demon:

"Fool!"

For him it was the end.

With his head buried in his arms on the rickety table, he slept drunkenly while the breeze died to less than a breath and the chirping of the crickets rose to a loud chorus.

WASN'T that proof enough that it wasn't the loss of his right to command that sent Peters from the easy chairs of every shipowner's agent in the East back to where he had started in his profession some fifteen odd years before? For there was a command for him, wasn't there? A command of a shady sort, perhaps, but nevertheless a command, and that, you know, is a matter of considerable importance. It was his faith in himself he had lost, I tell you! And nothing else mattered. Because as a matter of fact, he didn't have to go to sea at all. He had told Johanna, hadn't he, that he had laid aside quite a bit. He might have come to Ameri-

ca or gone to the continent and lived a respected life of comparative ease as a retired seaman, with folks calling him "Captain" with that air of condescension and awe. But he knew in his heart he could never do that, you know. He disappeared for months. Then he turned up again on the Singapore waterfront. Everyone had forgotten. And why the deuce should they remember such a trivial thing as an old man's misfortune?

For twelve years he went about the ports of the world in the fo'c'stles of ships, silent and obscure as all men are who win their bread upon the restless, faithless seas. And ever he seemed to be searching for something. I wonder what the deuce it was he went about searching for, like the lost bride of his youth? A moment of redemption for his tortured soul perhaps.

He came to us on the *Ecola,* when I was still in my 'teens and full of the glamor and the romance of youth, when I thought it quite fine to hear the gale strumm each halyard and stay taut as wire, and

to see the green demons come at her and gut her from stem to stern. That was something like in those days, what? He came to us, I say, gray haired, silent, sturdy, like a gnarled and knotted old oak covered with a sprinkling of snow. And I looked on him with reverence through my youthful, romantic eyes, when he joined us—after twelve years of struggling in his inarticulate way, to regain that mental poise so necessary to his highly imaginative conception of his own self respect.

On the *Ecola's* articles he signed his name, "James Peters, able seaman."

VIII

DEPARTURES! Landfalls! How meaningless must these words be to those who have never been a slave to carefree vagrancy, to the troubled peace of the limitless, meaningless, purple sea! As meaningless and as pitiless as life itself. But to us, what magic in the proud days of our youth. To set out in a thousand tons of frail wood to defy the universe, the elements, and even from them to win ports and laughter and love. In what an anguish of joy, with what romance I, with my youthful pride, gazed for the first time on the East and felt the onshore breeze pass through my hair, felt the swift rush of the evening shower sweeping past me to rustle the palm ashore and lay low the heat of the day! We will never forget that, the best days of our lives, the outlandishness, the first landfalls, with the sails drawing and the gulls crying. And it all passes away, obscured, like a lee shore overhung with the mist of a southeaster. Aye, before we quite know what it is all about. Passes away as swiftly and as silently as the days of our own youth.

That day is past. We have gone into steam now, you and I, and many a man has climbed to the bridge that would never have managed the poop ladder. It is the way of things. Yet I can see Peters and the *Ecola,* twenty days out for the coast, as clearly as though we had just paid off at the commissioners' yesterday. He was out on the sprit, overhauling some gear, with the *Ecola* rolling heavily about in a long, deep water swell. And each time she dipped her nose into it, the sea came up and spat at him, spat at a faithful servant of twenty-five odd years.

As I look back at her now, through the safety and security of my age, I have a feeling of compassion, even reverence, if you will, for the old *Ecola* homeward bound on her last voyage. Because the fires of youth burn not so sturdily now, eh? And we are not impatient with weariness and old age, as we were then.

Yet I think that somehow, even then, in the hour of my youth with all its disdain of age, I had a feeling of reverence for the stolid, slow old craft. Sentimentality? Well, she had shown me the East, hadn't she? And on her worn decks was I permitted to feel something of my power. And that, after all, is all that matters.

There we were. A little world, sufficient unto itself, living by the despotic ringing of a little bell, governed by the capricious breezes from windward, and ruled by a

quiet, simple old man with the perfect brown eyes of a little child. You would think we were Vikings of a nobler sort; that ours was some glorious mission or destiny. And all we were trying to do was to bring a cargo of rubber and tin to a port of discharge.

And you know, sometimes it seemed as though we weren't even capable of so simple a matter as that. For days on end, under a sun that blazed down on us out of a perfect, cloudless sky, we rolled about, almost as though the elements had conspired with her, the *Ecola,* to keep her from the completion of her last voyage. I was impatient, because I was young and home was a long way off.

AND still, for all my arrogance and pride, I had time even then for speculation about Peters. For he had the halo of romance about him and the breath of the East, and I thought him quite fine. When he came up for his watch on deck, those eyes instinctively flew aloft to the trim of the *Ecola's* yards, his feet steadied as though he were feeling her pulse. After twelve years of knocking about in the fo'c'stles of ships, in his heart he was still the master! It is something, I tell you, that you cannot knock out of a man, that weight of responsibility, that ingrown love of a ship. I tell you he was remarkable! What the deuce do you suppose it was that drove him from one ship's fo'c'stle to another? What do you suppose he expected to see in that searching glance of his to windward? Eh? A ship's life or death springs at her from windward. And his eyes kept searching the horizon as though he expected his fate, his redemption, the bride of his blasted youth, to come at him with a rush; as though he were afraid it would pass him by if he weren't eternally on his guard.

I came on him once, I remember, standing by the main fife rail, his gnarled hands tightly clenched as he stared fixedly into a clear and moonlit night. The stars played on the phosphorescence of a calm, untroubled sea, while like a ghostly thing the *Ecola* barely slid through the water, the gleam of her wake like a burning torch in the night. Her sails slatted in the faithless breaths of air, her blocks groaned, all her gear sighed wearily into the quiet night.

"Dear God, I could. I know I could!" suddenly I heard Peters' voice murmur, like a tormented soul.

What do you suppose he meant? A sense of tragedy seized me, for there was something brave, something fine, something that the glamorous fever of youth in me then, thrilled to in the sight of him standing here by the fife rail, completely shadowed by the ghostly spread of our mainsail, defying his fate with a murmur into the starlit, perfect night.

PEACEFULLY the days slid past us. The sun grew weaker. The stars looked down coldly now on our universe, while astern of us the *Ecola's* wake gleamed like a mile wide path of silver. We forgot the last shouts ashore as we slid from our berth ages ago, we forgot our heart aches and our loves, and the farewell crying of the gulls. We were content to pass the rest of our days in a purple world, hemmed in by a solid wall of dense, white clouds. It seemed we were doomed to it, we and the *Ecola* that had known the East ere ever my eyes were lifted up to the blue of the heavens.

Then one day the wall of cloud broke, and a feeble sun rose through the rift to look sightlessly down upon us, as though we had grown an accustomed and permanent part of the universe. A drift of cloud appeared in the southeast, like a dirty strip of rag, and drifted lazily toward us from windward. We looked at it transfixed, horrified, almost as though we had never seen anything quite like it before. I remember the hungry look Peters threw at it. And I wondered if it were the thing he had been living twelve odd years to see. It brightened him up. It brightened us all up, by Jove, for it meant wind. By God, it did that! That dirty mare's tail of a cloud came at us, the forerunning messenger of

a host, and it smeared a nasty patch across the sun as though it held that weak orb in utter disdain. The clouds massed hurriedly, until suddenly the windward horizon became a sullen mass of dirty gray that spread swiftly toward us. We shortened sail.

Peters, I remember, was at the wheel, two spokes tight in those immense, hairy hands of his, his eyes glued aloft, watching the royals come in. Captain Jameson and the second, at the rail at the break of the poop, stared to windward as though they were entranced at some miracle being enacted there. They were evidently talking it over. I believe that is the last time I saw either of them clearly, and even then the picture was barred by the lines of the *Ecola's* running gear.

Poor old Captain Jameson, and his heart trouble—or whatever it was the steward fixed those three hourly draughts up for. His hands grasped the rail tightly, as though he were afraid he might fall, and you could almost see through the transparent skin. The second towered above him like a ship's mast, his jaws working eternally over a huge cud, his trousers flapping about his thin legs like a scarecrow. And yet, they were fortunate, those two. For they didn't outlive their age.

THE rest is like a dream. A horrible dream that is so livid, it lives with me now as though it were but yesterday. But then I told you, didn't I, that she had taken a sort of despotic possession of me, the *Ecola,* and Peters, and the men who lived with her for over four months.

When night came, the wind had hauled to the east'ard. The black pall had spread across the whole sky and darkness took possession of our world. Polaris blinked defiantly for a moment before it was obliterated, and as it was blotted from the heavens it seemed that in the entire universe there was left no speck of light. The old man hung to his course. Bared down to our weather tops'ls, the *Ecola* labored slowly through the black water and the blacker night on a taut bowline, sending the brine flying to the inky sky with a mighty defiant hissing, flinging her counter high up in the air with its scroll work *Ecola!* and that gilt exclamation pointing downward at the "a" in a glorious gesture of defiance.

Do you recall those moments, eh? Before the great winds struck your frail, hand-wrought bundle of sturdy wood? How you felt her pulse with your feet steadied to her slanting decks, felt her poised, keen, expectant. The whole universe seemed immobile, poised there in the unspeakable gloom for a brief instant. Not a murmur, not a whisper. The wind dies suddenly as though some mighty, invisible hand had swept every living thing but you from the face of the earth.

My heart pounded like a trip-hammer there on her deck. I was proud of her, the *Ecola.* I was proud of myself. Nothing could harm me. I could outlive anything! By God, it was brave, that! And the *Ecola* and I, we waited for the gale.

Her sails slatted against the masts in that momentary calm. Her brace-blocks groaned weirdly. I heard some one breathing hard. He must have been close by me. I couldn't see, it was too dark. I wondered if it were Peters. And then I heard a low hissing that grew louder and louder till it seemed to fill every corner of the old ship and echo amongst her slackened running gear. Suddenly she heeled over in a sickening lurch; her foresail went full with a noise like a thunderclap and the next moment the lashing rain struck her bowed head. The gale was close behind.

And after that first puff, there was no wind, only the rain hissing down in torrents on the face of the black, expectant sea. It struck our sails with a steady imperative patter till it sounded as though a multitude of hurrying children's feet had taken possession of the *Ecola.* Some one came out of the poop cuddy and for a brief instant a pitch of light lay on her deck, and the rain looked there like so many bouncing diamonds. Then the pitchy night was in possession again. The rain lashed down on us, huddled against the rails, with a personal sort of fury as if it had some definite grievance against us in particular. Then the wind struck her, and the rain stung into our faces like hail. Her sails filled with a booming like a salvo of guns going off. She heeled over almost on

her beam-ends, and above the noise of the squall and the rain came the sound of water rushing about her stem as she started off, her aged head bowed under the dirty sky. I thought I heard Captain Jameson's weary sounding voice call, "Ease helm!" but I wasn't sure. She straightened up a bit, we hauled like mad on the lee braces, trimmed her up to it, and huddled against what shelter we could find, we shivered in the wet and windy darkness.

ALL that night the wind made, hauling gradually a point or two to the north'ard. The rain had stopped. The gale blew fiercely on. Cold, bitter, and hard it blew. The whole universe was filled with the noise of it. The seas rose and came at us in green mountains plumed with white. The gale clipped off the tops of the seas and flung the spray at us like so much biting hail. The world was a freezing immensity of boiling green and white. They came over her tired sides, they gutted her, they swept her from stem to stern. She staggered along with bowed head, the *Ecola,* laboriously lifting the green seas over her bows with a groan, flinging the spray a mile high. Ah, but she was still proud, the old *Ecola!* And we thought it brave and fine, because we were young and proud and our strength was new and a joy to us. Nothing could harm us!

We went below and fell into soggy bunks in a foul smelling fo'c'stle, turned in all standing, waiting, expecting a call every moment, while the gale blew great guns above with that steady, nerve-wracking howl that wears out body and soul. When we were called on deck, haggard and weary, the starboard watch was already struggling with the foresail. Poor old Jameson had at last decided to heave her to and tuck her in for the night.

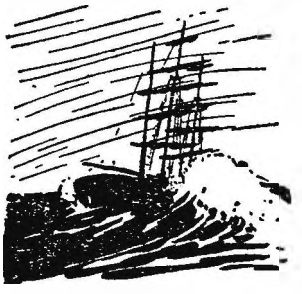
We struggled with the lines in the dirty, black night like so many puny gnomes about some monstrously senseless task. The immense, wet foresail bellied and whipped about in the gloom like a crazy white ghost of a demon. And then up aloft to make her fast, with the gale rapping you against the rigging like so many pieces of paper. And that steady, nerve-wracking, howling whine all about you, clawing at you, whistling past your ears, pounding into your very brain and ripping the leaden canvas from your numbed, bleeding fingers with an inhuman fury!

The second came up with us—was out on the weather yard, I think, close by me. I'm not sure. You couldn't see. You couldn't hear. Your fingers were that numb you couldn't even feel! Twice that damnable, live canvas was ripped out of our hands and we went at it again, the footropes swaying drunkenly under our feet. I heard a cry, faintly as from a great distance, just a short cry almost like a gasp wrenched from a man suddenly startled. That was all, and I'm not quite sure of that. But I suddenly felt that the second wasn't there any more. We hadn't any time for speculation, you understand. The faster we got the gaskets passed, the sooner we would have at least the drunken solidity of the deck beneath our feet.

By the time we had the fore and main in, the watch was over. Perhaps two, or three. It didn't matter very much. I caught a glimpse of Peters. I think it was in the fo'c'stle, perhaps not. His beard was wet, matted, and the brine clung like exotic, immense beads of perspiration to his leather-like face. His lips, I remember, were a trifle parted and the flame of old fires made his gray eyes gleam again, with an intensity that was almost uncanny. Then I lost him in the blackness. But it seemed I could still feel the intensity of his stare. I wondered vaguely if he knew the second had gone over the side. I wonder now if he knew that at last the ravished bride of his youth was coming to him in a night of storm and thunder, in a universe of freezing green sea and tormented souls, weary unto death.

Morning came. Dirty gray dawns with only enough light to impress upon us our misery. Half our galley house was gone. A few pieces of splintered wood was all that was left of our jolly boat. One of the

davits was splintered off a few feet from the deck aft, and stuck up like a bruised and maimed thumb. The seas washed the *Ecola* from stem to stern, played about the feet of her masts as though they were already in full possession of her. Yet stolidly, with a brutish like doggedness, she lifted each awful sea over her bows. The great gale howled on. Bitter and hard it blew, till it seemed to us as though we had never known anything but this as if we had been doomed for some terrible crime to spend the rest of our days in a sunless world of lashing sea and howling wind. It must surely have been in some other world, some other life, that we had felt the warm caresses of the steady trades, the blood red moon, the peace and awful quiet of the tropic night.



THEN the *Ecola* started a bad leak. She was worn out. It was almost too much for her. You couldn't blame her. We manned the pumps. An hour each watch, then two, then almost incessantly, watch in, watch out. Our eyes were hollow, black ringed. We looked at our shipmates as though we had never seen them before; wondered where the devil they had come from. And yet, with that dull ache in our arms, in our legs, in our brains that had long since ceased their futile demand for sleep, in the midst of it all I felt that treacherous buoyancy of youth. As though I were objectively looking at myself there at the pumps. Treacherous? Yes, for it goads you on but to old age. But I was young and powerful, and I gloried in it. If it blew for a hundred years, it would never wear me out!

I pumped, and Peters was close by me. He was always close to me, it seems, and yet I could never quite reach him. What an impossible sight! Agleam with a dream of redemption, of glorious, romantic conquest, he sang at the pumps. Into the teeth of the gale he sang, I tell you! He went out to meet his destiny with a song on his lips. What weapons are there against such a man?

IX

WHEN the gale had done with us, we were miles off our course. For how many days it had had us on the rack, I don't know. It was too much of a horrible dream. It was the worst blow I had ever been in then. But I remember that when one gray and dirty dawn broke over us, we who were haggard and frozen and wet, and the *Ecola* with her almost naked masts scudding low beneath the black clouds as if she were huddling close to the face of the tormented sea in an effort to keep warm; when that dawn broke hesitantly over us, we felt somehow that the gale had blown itself out. And like some half broken and discarded toy, it left us there, too disdainful of us to have completely destroyed us. A feeble and horribly discolored sun even came out for a second to look upon the handiwork of the elements. And then, as though ashamed of what it saw, it disappeared behind the racing, dirty clouds while the seas still swept hungrily at the *Ecola.*

Captain Jameson mustered us all aft. He stood at the break of the poop and looked sadly and wearily down at us, collected below him amidst the wreckage of his main deck. He looked terribly old, worn out. His white hair seemed somehow dirty, and I was fascinated by the transparency of the skin of his emaciated hands with which he clung to the rail to steady himself. It had been a nasty ordeal for an old skipper with a weak heart. His mate stood beside him up there, an immense, burly fellow. He looked fierce, like an old pirate, as he glowered down at us and pulled energetically at his great mustaches. And every moment his eyes flew aloft and then back at us, so swiftly you could hardly follow the look. He was impatient to be about his work.

I have a vision of it all now. A portion of the *Ecola's* rail amidships was gone and every now and then as she wallowed about the seas came aboard and then rushed back over her battered sides with a noise like a great waterfall. And the wind whined dolefully through her rigging like

a choir singing a horrible funereal undertone as the old man spoke to us. We stood on the deck of the storm battered *Ecola,* haggard and hollow-eyed and looked up at our master and our mate, while the dirty storm clouds still raced over our heads in the sickly gray light.

That immense nigger of a steward of ours, who had foretold us our ill luck, towered above us. Strange how that insignificant detail clings to my memory. I distinctly remember him there, bareheaded, his huge, coal black head and hair floating above our heads like a patch of greasy black oil on the surface of a bay.

Captain Jameson's voice came to us faintly as though speaking had suddenly become a great exertion to him.

"Men," he said slowly, "Mr. Perchly, our—ah—second officer—" He paused, "Ah, we have lost an able officer." He stopped again, as though he didn't quite know what else to say and frowned down on us with his weary face. "Ah—I will take the deck in his stead." Another pause followed.

"That is all, men," Jameson continued. "Go below the watch." But he still stood there and before I turned forward, I found myself wondering if he weren't standing there because he hadn't the energy to move. Poor old Jameson.

"Out tops's reefs!" shouted the mate.

THE next day the sun came out and looked listlessly down on us as though nothing untoward had happened, as though wondering idly where the deuce we had been, what we had been up to, to have received such a battering. We dried our beds, cleaned our fo'c'stle, and labored incessantly at repairing as best we could the ravages of the gale. The mate was about decks continually; I don't believe he ever slept. And as though in appreciation of our efforts, the *Ecola* closed her seams and gave us respite from the gruelling work at the pumps. But the wind still held fresh from the northeast and like an enchanted thing, we struggled and beat our way laboriously, mile for mile, toward a coast that had by now become a glorious illusion.

The steward had dragged a great wicker easy chair, some relic of the *Ecola's* youth, up to the poop and lashed it there for the old man close to the cabin skylight. And there he sat, his thin hands grasping the arms of the chair, his head bared, while his eyes, the only part of him still keenly alive, roved incessantly between the horizon and the *Ecola's* trucks. Can you see him there in the windy dusk as clearly as I? With the black form of the steward periodically bending over him, his keen, old eyes set in the dying body, still dominant, still the master of his ship!

That day we went on short rations.

Starboard tack; port tack. Hopelessly we beat back and forth, sailing hundreds and hundreds of miles and so little made good on the course, it was pitiable. An enchanted ship with a ghost of an old man in a wicker chair on the poop in command. Days passed. Months passed. I think years rolled steadily and unnoticed over our heads. Our lot was nothing but a succession of calms and head winds. We painted, we trimmed yards, we set tops'ls and furled them. A horrible dream. There was no escape. No other world existed for us; the sea and the sky.

But it didn't seem to bother Peters. He lived like a man in a dream. And wasn't it a glorious thing, that dream that haunted him so? He sat on his seachest in our fo'c'stle beneath a smoky lamp, bent so intently over the chart he was studying, oblivious of our noisy talk and our grumblings. I remember Martinez, our bos'n, was standing in the center of the small fo'c'stle. A short stocky figure with the coal black hair clinging all about his ears and forehead, an immense sheath knife strapped to his thigh. He looked lurid in that ghastly light as he waved his arms at us in protestation of the skipper's action.

"Him sitting up there half dead, with those cats' eyes glued on you—no wonder we can't get nowheres. Why don't he let a man take a watch, eh? An' me bosun." He snorted in disgust. "One o' us ought to stand second mate's watch o' this here ship!"

When I relieved the wheel, I heard Jameson murmur from the depths of that chair to the mate, who had just come on deck, "I'll have to sleep here, Mr. Dallis.

No use going below." His voice trailed off.

"Very well, sir. Can I fix you something?"

"No thank you. Just tuck that robe under my feet, will you?" he answered listlessly. "Thanks. Call me, eh—?"

I looked over from where I stood by the wheel. I thought it would be rather a queer sight to see that immense mate tucking a robe about an old skipper on the poop of a battered old barque. But it was too dark. I couldn't see.

A fitful, treacherous breeze sprang up on our quarter, and before the mate's watch was out, we had the *Ecola's* royals and skys'ls shaken out to it. I went below with the song of that fair breeze in my ears and the unconscious prayer that the gods had at last deigned to smile on us and our weary old hull. I remember I thought the old man's reply uncommonly hearty to the mate's, "She goes full and by, sir." The mate's voice, on a last round of the deck before he turned in for a few hours' sleep, drifted lazily into the fo'c'stle as I piled into my bunk. I fancied I heard a voice answer. I thought it was Peters. Then I fell asleep.

I HAVE no recollection of being awakened, or of coming up on deck, it all happened so quickly, in an instant. I was simply suddenly aware of that sickening, slatting noise, the cracking of stout timber splintering, that noise that comes to your horrified ears above the whine of the strong wind and that strikes terror into the hearts of a seaman; a din that joins with the howl of the wind and lives with you to your dying day—a ship's incoherent cry of agony at being maimed and crippled.

I FOUND myself on deck. The racing clouds bared a waning moon for a moment, and by its light I saw the mate, clad only in his underwear, hurling himself forward to the main braces, his mouth open. He was shouting some command, I suppose, but you couldn't hear. And vividly framed under the black sky in that momentary ghastly light, I saw the stooped figure of Peters climbing the poop ladder, his hair flying in the wind. I saw Jameson's figure stretched out in his chair, the robe that the mate had tucked him in torn loose and flapping wildly in the night. He seemed to be idly staring up at the sullen heavens as the spanker boom tore across the deck over his head and ended up with a whang like the crack of doom. I remember I wondered vaguely what the devil Peters was doing up there. Then the racing clouds covered the weak moon and blotted it all from my sight. But the sickening feel of the vessel taken all aback in a great squall of wind and the sight of the wild confusion and chaos about her decks is stamped indelibly on by brain. Peculiar, but I was angry, torn with rage at the old man who had let the *Ecola* in for such a jam. But I didn't know then that old Jameson was beyond helping her. I sprang to where I had last seen the mate.

"Hard a-lee!" I heard him bellow.

Then I felt a rush of wind past my head, a crash, a dull thud, then something that sounded like a sigh. I heard the voice of that big, black steward shouting something in my ear. And together we lifted a brave seaman from the black deck and carried the limp form of Mr. Dallis, our mate, aft. The *Ecola's* maintop had carried away. A spar had gored him even as he sprang to her assistance. When we got him into the feeble, swaying light of his cabin, he was looking up at me with a puzzled sort of expression on his face, like a little child meekly asking to be treated gently. As we laid him in his bunk, a little red bubble appeared in the corner of his mouth. He looked up at me again and closed his eyes as though he were tired, very tired, and wanted to sleep.

I felt stunned, horrified, and before I turned and rushed out on deck again, I reached down and reverently lifted his hairy hand that hung listlessly over the edge of the bunk, and placed it by his side. When I got back on deck, the *Ecola* was falling off rapidly and you felt that a guiding presence was again in possession

of her poop. Her masts lost themselves in the low hanging, dense, squall clouds racing madly over her head. Then the rain burst loose upon us and the *Ecola* reeled under the lashing of rain and wind. And suddenly above the hiss of the passing squall, above the dying howl of the wind through her gear, like the sound of a god in a cavern of darkness, a mighty voice took possession of the *Ecola,* echoing dominantly from her every spar and passing through us like an electric charge. And suddenly I knew the meaning of Jameson's fixed stare at the heavens. For it was Peters' voice. A voice like the booming of a great gun, the voice of the *Brilliante,* of the *White Cloud,* of the skys'l yarder *Condore!* "Crazy Captain Jimmy Peters'" voice! He took possession of us, of the *Ecola,* of the elements!

"Stand by to wear ship!" he bellowed at us from out of the night like a bull gone mad. And we sprang to the braces and sheets. Spring! What the devil did we care about investigations and inquiries? By God, *we* knew he belonged on the poop!

And Martinez, our bosun, it was he who roared back at him a moment later, "Sheets and tacks ready, sir!" Sir, he said, I tell you!

"Hard a-lee," came the booming answer from the poop. Slowly she swung about and we jumped for the foretop braces before ever we heard that voice that had so completely taken possession of the *Ecola* shout, "Foretops'l haul!"

MORNING broke cold and gray over the *Ecola* racing toward a coast obscured by mist and squalls, with her lee rail smothered in white spume, her maintop gone, bulwarks caved in, and that bruised thumb of a davit aft sticking up at the heavens like a mutely pointing finger. On she raced like a mad thing, all her gear astrain. To be driven like that again! What memories it must have evoked in her dumb old timbers. For the wind was on her quarter, and I told you it was Peters on her poop, once more the "crazy Captain Jimmy Peters" of his youth on the China coast, who never knew what it was to shorten sail before a fair wind. And as I looked up there and saw him through the mist and spray, I understood that invocation of his ages ago by the main fife rail, under the lurid sky:

"Dear God, I could. I know I could!"

He stood at the taffrail, a gray old man gazing astern, as though if he could have done it with honor he would have taken the *Ecola* back to where she had come from, back to where that silly vision of his had materialized in a night of storm and thunder. And the figure of Captain Jameson sat stretched out behind him, and through the mist I fancied those sightless eyes were riveted in a smile on Peters' back, as if he were well satisfied with the hands his ship had been intrusted to.

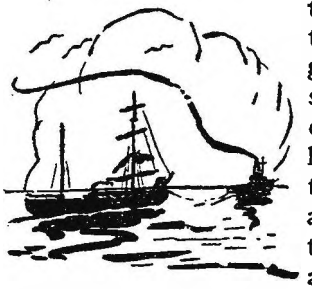
When we spoke the *Fisque* as she loomed at us out of the mist like an ugly black beetle and asked her to report us, it was Peters himself who ran the flags up our halyard truck. As though she belonged to him—by right of conquest. And the sun came out for a second as the buntings burst into a blaze of color from her masthead to her battered old deck.

AYE, he made his landfall. Through the mist and rain of a southeasterly blow the stern cliffs of the coast loomed up for him and his ship. Proudly, with royals flying, the *Ecola* bore down on the coast that had been for over four long months the land of our hearts' desire. With a great bubbling of foam at her eyes, she pressed down the billows and flung them far out from her bows. And in a last gesture of proud defiance, Peters ran the houseflag up what was left of our once lofty main. Bravely it snapped out up there from that splintered mast, proclaiming to all the world her conquest. And to me, it was a symbol also of Peters' conquest.

I looked up to where he stood peering wistfully and anxiously at that sullen crag that stuck out to meet him. Through the haze it looked no more than a great hazy shadow—his landfall.

His landfall. Aye, and his departure, too. For he wasn't on the poop when the tug came out after us. We backed her tops'ls and went aloft to furl the *Ecola's* sails for the last time. And there wasn't any hearty shout at us from the deck of, "Harbor

furl, aloft there, boys. Harbor furl!" I looked astern at that insolent black speck bearing down on us to take possession. For a moment then I saw Peters on the poop, framed in the mist and haze so that I couldn't see him clearly. He threw a glance at the tug, and I imagined there was scorn and proud defiance in that last look of his astern. Then his old eyes agleam with his conquest, flew aloft for a brief second to the *Ecola's* trucks, while the gulls screamed, screamed and circled above him. Then he turned and disappeared down the cabin cuddy and I lost him. I lost him forever. And the supine figure of Captain Jameson was again in command of his poop, his great leonine head drooped now onto his chest as though he were peacefully asleep.



They scrambled aboard her like so many angry gnats, while the ugly tug stood off and waited for her brood. You would have thought we had committed an unpardonable sin. What right had the old *Ecola* to thus obtrude herself upon them after having been given up as lost, as unaccounted for? It shocked them. It destroyed their faith in their own sound judgment. I believe they actually begrudged her the right to wearily let go her anchors in the roadstead after one hundred and forty-three days out of Singapore. But Peters, proud, defiant, obscure as ever, mocked them with an unfathomable scorn in the moment of his triumph.

We found him below, in Jameson's bunk, his eyes set in a fixed stare at the compass over his head, a smile of infinite peace on his grizzled, unkempt face, as though he were well satisfied with the course it indicated. There, in the moment before we found him, he had held his last communion with his romantic, sentimental soul—with things invisible and inscrutable. And what he saw in that last, searching gaze of his, he must have found not quite so horrible. For there was a smile on his face, as though for one fleeting moment he had searched himself and found a lasting truth there.

I tell you, he was remarkable. I have always a clear vision of that smile, a smile inscrutable, a smile that had become eternal, that I was perhaps not deserving enough to penetrate, but that I cannot forget. And I say he was fortunate. Fortunate indeed! For that moment so evanescent, the moment of his greatest triumph, his greatest conquest, he had captured for all eternity!

WHEN IS A HORSE TIED?

THE surest way to tie a horse is to fasten a rope around his neck, using a bowlin' knot, which cannot slip or tighten and choke him. To fasten the end of the reins to a hitchrack or tree is a mistake, because most horses will break the reins sooner or later and get free. A rope is usually tied to the saddle to be used for this purpose. If tied with a rope, a saddle horse will stand quietly waiting for hours and sometimes days, provided the cinch is loosened. If the rider forgets to loosen the cinch, most saddle horses will become restless and uncomfortable before very long.

But it is not always necessary to tie a horse with a rope. Sometimes he is "tied to the ground" by the simple device of dropping the reins on the ground and letting them drag. A horse thus tied will browse around, moving gingerly in order to avoid stepping on the reins, sometimes progressing sideways. If he happens to step on them, he immediately backs away and tries again. Most horses are unable to travel far with the reins dragging, although an occasional one learns how to manage it.

There is still another way in which to tie a horse, now almost unheard of but once widely practiced by the early inhabitants of California. Before dismounting, the rider pulled up the horse's head as far as he could, so that the neck formed a graceful arch. Then, with the reins still tight, he fastened them to the saddle horn with a half hitch, and dismounted. A horse pulled up in this manner would stand still and consider himself tied, only if he had been trained to do so. The early inhabitants of California were proud of their horses, and a horse that could not be tied to the saddle horn by the reins, did not quite qualify in fast company.—J. H. H.

FACTS

By THOMAS A. CURRY

IT WASN'T SO MUCH THE ACTUAL HOLDUP AS THE NEWSPAPER ACCOUNT OF IT THAT MADE FOR DRAMA AND A SOLUTION OF THE MYSTERY OF THE ROBBERY OF FISHBEIN'S CIGAR STORE

"*BANDITS STROLL OFF WITH $2000.*"

"Two men entered the cigar store of Morris Fishbein, 863 Eighth Avenue, last night at ten o'clock, and while one stood guard at the door, the other forced Fishbein, who was alone in the store, to open the safe and turn over two thousand dollars in cash.

"They bound and gagged Fishbein and left at their leisure. The police are working on the description given them by Fishbein."

SEVERAL of the morning papers carried this item on an inside page. There was nothing to distinguish the holdup; the address was poor, the store obscure, the amount of loot comparatively small. There had been no complications, comical or tragic; no new trick used by the bandits and no shooting.

The authors of the story, the district men, had sent it in by telephone. It was a typical police station story; it bristled with facts, names, addresses.

At ten-fifteen the evening of the holdup, there had been three reporters in the small, dingy office opposite the police station. One electric light shone yellow; there were three battered desks at which the men sat, reading, yawning, smoking. Two of the desks were on one side of the room, the third was opposite, in the corner. A man of sixty, gray-haired, drawn of face, wearing gold-rimmed glasses and a tattered brown hat, was at the right. At the left was a lean young fellow, better dressed, but with the same drawn expression—the mark of night occupation. At the third desk sat a short, strong-faced man of thirty-five. This last was Bob Young, who was the real worker. It was he who knew all the detectives, lieutenants and patrolmen, how to get the all-powerful facts which the Desk demanded.

The phone beside Young rang.

"There's been a little stick-up down the Avenue," he said, as he hung up.

Mann, the oldest reporter, cursed and yawned. The youngest sprang to his feet and followed Young from the room. Mann put his feet up on his desk. Young would give him the story when he returned, and Mann would telephone it to his office, for a rewrite man to embellish.

Young trotted briskly down the street toward Eighth Avenue. Williams, the tall youth, strode beside him. They soon reached the address given them over the phone by Young's informant, who was the lieutenant on the desk where the holdup had been reported.

CHILDREN of six or seven played on the walks, in spite of the late hour; hundreds of cars, belonging to theatre-

goers, were parked along the side streets. Cheap refreshment stands were open, shoe stores, cigar stores and fruit juice stations. The crowds pounded their feet on wooden walks above the subway construction. Gaps showing workers below yawned at their left as the reporters walked downtown; the sound of electric drills cutting through rock, and occasionally a deep explosion as a blast was set off, mingled with the traffic noises.

The cigar store was like a thousand others of its kind, red front, the window filled with toys, signs, dummy boxes of cigars, making it impossible to see more than the ceiling lights inside.

Young led the way. He stepped into the store and went to the rear, where a stout man sat, pretending to read.

"You Morris Fishbein?"

"Yeh. What you want?"

"I'm a reporter. I want to know about the holdup."

"Sure. Two fellas come in about quarter to ten. I was by myself here just like when you came in. One walks back and says to give him a pack of cigarettes. The other turned his back and stood by the door. I reach for the cigarettes and this first fella pulls out a big gun and pokes it in my stomach. He makes me open the safe and then he ties me up, takes all the money and goes out. That's all."

Young had the facts down, the name, address and identity of the proprietor.

"How much did they get?" he asked.

Fishbein shook his heavy head. "I can't tell you," he said, pursing his thick lips.

"Why? Don't you know?"

"Sure I know. But the detectives was here, and they said don't tell nobody. That's why."

The small green eyes of Fishbein turned up at Young. Now that the horrible fright of having a revolver poked into his stomach was over, he was beginning to enjoy the sensation of importance. Already he had told the story many times, to his wife, to the detectives, over the phone to his relatives.

"Oh, well. The detectives will tell us. You better let me know how much they got, so's there won't be any mistake."

But Fishbein was stubborn. The big plain clothes men had impressed him almost as much as the rat-like bandit. "That's all I gotta say." He turned back to his paper.

YOUNG shrugged, and followed by Williams, went to the station. He climbed the worn wooden stairs at the rear, and entered the detectives' room.

"Hello, Marty," he said, to the detective who was on duty there. "Say, how much did these guys get at Fishbein's?"

The detective shook his head. "Mac's got that," he said. "Ask him. I think he's keepin' it under his hat, though."

"Hell's bells. Come on, Williams."

Young stopped and questioned his friend the lieutenant. But the lieutenant would not or could not divulge the amount taken. Mac, who had the case, was out.

"He's not spillin' it, Bob," said the lieutenant.

"Oh, all right."

The two reporters returned to their desks. Mann accepted the story as Young gave it to him. "How much did they get?" he asked.

"The dicks won't tell."

Mann threw down his pad, on which he had written the outline of the story. "Hell. It's no good without that."

"I know it. We'll have to guess. It couldn't have been much over a thousand. Though Fishbein might be a bookie, in which case he'd have quite a bit lying around. And a safe. He must have had some cash. Let's call it two thousand. That's good enough. It won't get over a stick, if they use it at all."

The three phoned in the story, and as it was another ripple to augment the interesting crime wave, it was given space.

YOUNG was upstairs in the detectives' room the next night. MacLaren, who had the case with his partner Clancy, was smoking a cigar before starting out on duty.

"How about that little stick-up last night, Mac?" asked Young. "How much did they get? I took a chance and said two grand. Was that anywhere near right?"

MacLaren grinned. "Pretty near," he said. "Just two figures off. I thought you guys would make it something like that."

"How much was it?" Young insisted.

But MacLaren turned the query aside. "We ain't had any luck on it," he said. "There was nothin' to work on. This Fishbein guy was so scared he saw forty guys. I asked him did the guy have black hair, and he says yes. Then a little later I ask him did the guy have red hair, and he says yes. Nobody got a good look at 'em. We worked all last night, talkin' to stoolies and so on, but didn't get anything. It'll never be solved unless we have a stroke of luck. I thought maybe you guys would help me."

"What do you mean?"

But MacLaren had closed his large, good-natured mouth and nothing but the cigar emerged therefrom.

Young spoke on other subjects, of women, of race horses and of drink. Half an hour later a patrolman opened the door and winked at MacLaren.

"They want youse downstairs, Mac," he said mysteriously, upon which Young arose with alacrity and went down the steps ahead of the detective.

THE patrolman led the way to the locker room in the rear of the station. It was a large chamber, where the men changed into uniform, and where they could lounge when on reserve duty. A long table stood in the center of the room. There was a couch along one wall.

Six men were playing poker at the table. Two others, coats off, leaned back in chairs reading papers. Another was bending over the couch.

A man lay groaning there. He was bleeding, internally, evidently, for the blood occasionally gushed from his lips.

He was a small, rat-like person. He turned tortured eyes up at MacLaren, who regarded him coolly.

"Have you sent for the ambulance, Charlie?" asked the detective.

"Yeh. It'll be here in a minute."

MacLaren pulled up a chair by the dying man. "What you got to say, kid?" he asked.

"Johnny Mull done it—" gasped the wounded one.

"He shot me."

"What's your name?"

"Frank—Frank Geogehan."

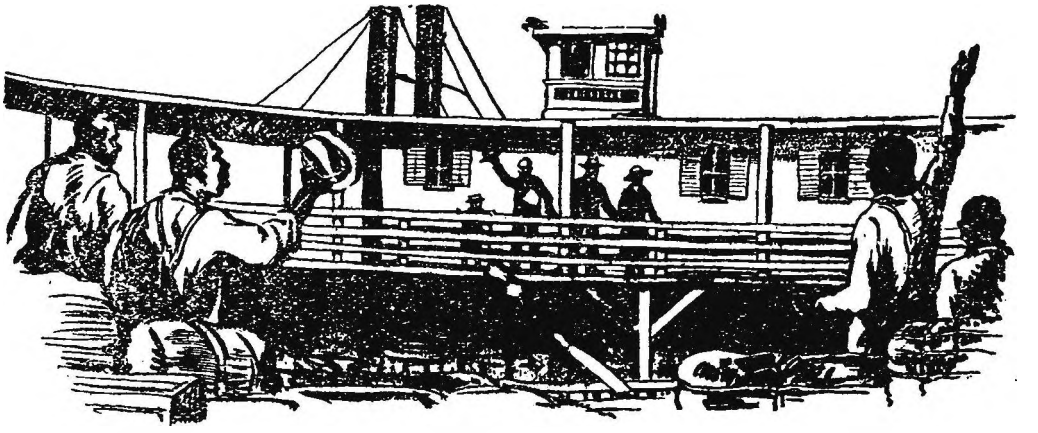
"What'd he shoot you for?"

"Last night we done a job. Fishbein's store, on Eighth. Mull made me hold the gun. He stood by the door. We was to split half and half. We got away clean. This evenin', Mull comes around and shoots me. I only got twenty dollars outa that safe. The paper says we got two thousan', and Mull believed it."

DUCK NETS

FROM the decks of the excursion steamers that ply in summertime between Seattle and Alaska, may be seen on many sand spits, pairs of tall, slim poles seventy-five to a hundred feet in height. These poles are the standards upon which the Indians hang their duck snares. Just before nightfall, the Indians climb the poles, suspend from the tops a length of fish net, now-a-days, the ordinary cotton salmon web, but in the olden times a web made from the fine roots of the cedar. Only half of the net is allowed to hang free from the tops of the poles. The remaining half is looped up, held to the tops of the poles by two lengths of fine cord. This cord descends to the earth, and is long enough to permit of the ends being carried into adjacent clumps of shrubbery, or behind rocks. The ducks, in their night flight, always select the low sand spits and cross them in going from bay to bay. The Indians, with the ends of the cords in their grasp, listen for the whirr of wings. When the ducks begin thudding against the stretched net, the strings are yanked, the looped half of the net falls, and many times scores, even hundreds, of ducks are entangled between the two halves of the mesh.—

H. H. M.



THE CRATE FOR CAPE GIRARDEAU

By PAUL DERESCO AUGSBURG

IN THE OLD STEAMBOATIN' DAYS OF CAP'N TEXAS ELI, NO MAN WOULD HAVE DARED DO WHAT WAXLER DID. BUT NOW THE OLD DAYS WERE GONE, AND STEAMBOATIN' WASN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE. STILL OLE MISSISSIP' HAS A WAY OF TAKING CARE OF HER OWN

NIGHT settled over the river and lights shone faintly yellow, but still the trucks and drays came laden down to the levee. From his chair on the cabin deck Old-timer could see them creep up the stage to the covered barge which served as office and wharf boat. Through the rain he could see them, great dark shapes waiting in line on the levee, waiting their turn to discharge their freight and be clattering on their way. Occasionally he would hear the heavy stomp of a dray horse or the voices of the drivers. A train would hurry past on the elevated tracks beyond the levee, and for a moment Old-timer would hear nothing but the gasp of steam, the wail of a whistle, the noisy rush of wheels. Then the train would vanish around a bend and the boss darky's voice would come up to him again.

"You got Sainte Genevieve; cross over and sing out 'Cape.' You got McNeely's Landin'; *on* the coal. You got——"

For three hours that voice had droned from the boiler deck, directing the colored roustabouts who came bearing pieces of cargo. Barrels, boxes, bales, kegs, crates, burlap covered bundles, buckets, sacks—an endless line of shuffling negroes loading the *Queen of Cairo*. Down the plank they'd come, pause a moment while the boss darky found the label, go aft in obedience to his direction, then return to the wharf for more. When night fell the mate had brought him a lantern, which he held up to each item of freight to read its destination.

"You got Cape Girardeau; cross over and sing out 'Cape.' Follow suit. You got McNeely's Landin'; *on* the coal. Sing out 'Cape.' Sing out 'Cape.' You got—Hey, wait a minute, nigger! How can I read that there when you got it on your haid?"

For three hours this had gone on, and still the drays were coming. Old-timer, muttering to himself, got up and sauntered forward. At the stairs he met one of the pilots just back from an errand to town. He was talking to the captain. Old-timer's ears caught a phrase, "—Eli Erskine's daughter."

"Huh! What's old Texas Eli's daughter up to now?" he demanded curiously.

"She's dead, Old-timer," said the captain queerly. "Tom just heard that she's been murdered."

"Old Texas Eli's daughter?"

"Shot dead," nodded the pilot. "A bullet through the head. Say, the whole St. Louis police department's on the job, from the looks of it. I see three machines full go past, and every man had a rifle. I hear they've got the fellow trapped. Fellow named Waxler, they tell me. Ever know a fellow named Waxler?"

Old-timer shook his head. "But I knew Texas Eli, I tell you. I can remember his first boat, the *Henry B. Allen*. Yes, and I can remember the day he caught Windy Kansas on the jaw and knocked him clean into the river. Clean off the for'ard guard and into the river. She was close to flood stage, too, and Windy weren't no swimmer."

"Eli Erskine was a man for you," the captain paid him tribute.

"And his daughter! I remember when she was no bigger'n that there bucket. She grew up a looker, too. What did this fellow kill her over, Tom?"

"Don't exactly know. Some sort of affair, I suppose."

"Lucky for him old Texas is dead."

"Lucky? Old Texas'd tear him to pieces."

"Texas Eli's soul," Old-timer said solemnly, "is a-rantin' and ravin' tonight, and there's a fact."

"Yep, lucky for that fellow he's dead. They wouldn't need to call out no police——"

Eastward, where Illinois lay snug and shadowed, there had been a snakelike dart of lightning, and now the thunder cracked out in a choking fury. It was as though a reservoir had been blasted, so heavily the rain came. Old Mississippi boiled with it, and the massive spans of Eads Bridge became gray shapes scarcely visible. The boss darky's voice was still.

But presently the downpour slackened. The roustabouts' feet resumed their monotonous scuffling. The words came up as before: "Cross over and sing out 'Cape.' You got Sainte Genevieve. You got—" Old-timer, peering down at the moving pageant of cargo, saw a huge crate descend the gangplank. It was too long for a hand truck to take it, and the roustabouts were sliding it down the incline. For a moment, as the lantern was held up close, Old-timer could see the consignee's name painted upon one side. "Hector Hanks, Cape Girardeau, Mo." He shook his head as he slowly turned away.

There could be no good in it, Old-timer reflected, if the crate was for Hector Hanks. A bad actor, that Hanks. The moonshine he sold was rotgut, distilled murder, dilute poison. His ways with ignorant girls were those of a beast that preys. His dice, it was said, were loaded; certainly he enjoyed more luck than the law of percentage allowed for. He had killed men, folks felt certain, but there was no proof to back their suspicion. Old-timer's belief was steadfast in Hanks' thorough badness.

He sat down again on a deck chair and stared out at the rain swept levee. "No good in it, sure enough, or it wouldn't be going to Hanks."

A train of the Alton roared past, inbound for the Union Station. Old-timer's eyes followed the dull glare from the firebox, the lighted Pullman windows, the fleeting vision of dining-car grandeur. "Old Texas Eli used to say he'd as lief go by mule as steam train. *There* was a river man, for a fact. It's God's mercy he never lived to see what steamboatin's a-come to. And his own little Sophie murdered? A-rantin' his soul is tonight, old Texas Eli's soul."

Old-timer's mind went groping back to touch memories of a long ago; days when Eli Erskine was a two-fisted tomcat of the texas deck, alive and scowling and laughing, an irresistible flesh-and-blood man instead of the half legendary figure which had been born of the river yarning. There was the time his pilot collapsed with a stroke; old Eli, wanting a doctor for him, ran the Hat Island crossing in the black of night and quarter-less-twain by the lead! Then there was the feud between Eli and Hillbaugh; *Cane* Hillbaugh of Tanager Bottoms, the same who later was shot by a posse after he'd killed Judge Johnson in open court of a Monday. A rugged, gusty, contentious life, strenuous as the day was long had been old Texas Eli's. Old-timer remembered the time he bet his boat against a farm he'd never even

seen. A foolhardy wager it was, but Eli won despite all creation. At Cairo the farmer's wife was at the landing, waiting for her husband. Texas Eli saw her, a tragic little woman with a child in arms, and promptly gave her the farm. But best of all, Old-timer thought, was the way Texas Eli had served the gambler who was known as Windy Kansas.

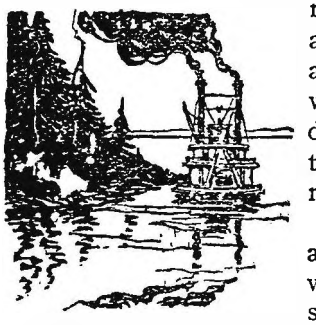
The captain's dog came padding across the deck and halted at Old-timer's chair. Old-timer patted the animal's head and scratched behind the ears.

"Texas Eli's tough old soul is a-rantin' and ravin' tonight." He spat into the stream and nodded his head at the dog. "A-rantin' and ravin' tonight," he repeated, "or I didn't never know him."

AT A quarter past nine the bell tolled four times, by which token the river front knew that the *Queen of Cairo* had finished loading and needed only a crew of roustabouts to discharge her freight at the landings. A score of negroes straggled leisurely out from dives and rooming hovels. They gathered around the mate, there on the slope of the levee, and haggled over wages. It was late, the *Queen of Cairo* was hours behind her schedule; every minute she remained tied up would be money out of pocket. The darkies knew it and waited, and at last they got their price.

Leaning on the rail of the after guard, Old-timer could see them swarm aboard from the wharf boat. At once the bell sounded thrice, the pilot's summons to duty, and Old-timer proceeded at an ambling pace to his shining brass controls. Again the bell rang, a single stroke, and immediately the engine-room signal jangled out its order. The pistons moved, the great wooden pitmen came to life; the huge wheel began to beat old Mississippi, and the *Queen of Cairo* backed, not without some majesty, into the muddy stream.

She swung around in a wide circle, while the lights of the levee grew dimmer to the eye. From his place at the controls Old-timer watched St. Louis slip away to larboard and give place to a broad stretch of river. Then, the arc continuing, he was gazing toward Illinois. The signal jangled again; he halted his engines and



reversed them, and the venerable river packet went gliding downstream through the rain.

Old-timer sat and smoked a while, letting the sounds of the steamboat beat gently upon his mind. There was the even, soothing grunt of the pistons, the eternal plash of river water cascading from the paddles. There was the meek lowing of a cow in the pen by the after guard. There was the chatter of darkies forward, shooting craps amid the cargo. Occasionally a phrase or fragment of phrase would come back to him: "Half a dollah," "Cut yo' haidless," "Baby, roll for papa."

After a space, Old-timer opened his locker and brought out his radio set. He placed it on a table and slowly made his connections. The days of haste were gone for him, there was philosophy in the very deliberation of Old-timer's movements now.

"Thunder's quieted down," he mumbled as he fussed. "Ought to get somethin' pretty good. By gol, this thingdad here it's pretty wore. Maybe I got a screw that'll maybe fit it."

As he straightened up he spied the captain's dog coming toward him between the lanes of freight. It was a slow approach, for there was much to engage its attention. So many smells to sniff: apple smells and cow smells, the cold hard smells of farm implements, the smell of painted furniture, the familiar smells of negroes who had gone with the *Queen of Cairo* before, the different smells of the one or two who were making their initial journey.

"Sniff 'em, puppy, sniff 'em," chuckled Old-timer. "You're just in time, sure 'nough, to get the smell of a little tune."

He saw the dog suddenly stiffen, its ears pointing, a low muttered growling simmering in its throat. It advanced alertly, cautiously, upon a stack of freight, and

then it sprang back with a savage bark and stood there all abristle.

"Sic 'em, boy!" called a darky. "Go cotch that rat by the neck."

But it wasn't a rat, Old-timer knew, for then the dog would have burrowed in, struggling and whining, avid to reach its victim. Only something untoward in the ways of smells would make it act like this.

"What you got there, puppy? What's on your nose?"

Old-timer picked up a lantern and walked leisurely forward. That would be the Cape freight, he reflected; all the cargo for Cape Girardeau was stowed away well aft. He peered in at it and grunted an exclamation. There, at the bottom of an assorted stack which reached clear up to the deck beams, lay the crate for Hector Hanks. The Christian name was plainly visible in the yellow light of his lantern.

"By gol! There's no good in it, for a fact." Old-timer stood there blinking, his slow wits pondering the matter. "Now, what do you suppose Heck Hanks is a-havin' shipped in that crate? If it wasn't all wedged down and around, I'm dogged if I wouldn't see."

But only the end, nailed solid with sugar pine, was easily accessible from the passage. The crate lay on a slatted side, and freight was packed closely about it. The slats, Old-timer could see, were stout, but through the spaces between them he saw heavy wrappings of paper. When they were discharging cargo next day at the Cape, he aimed to tear a bit of that paper and have a peep at its contents.

The captain's dog, still muttering, followed him back to his table. It listened for a minute when a dance tune sprang from the radio, and then as the negroes came aft to hear it sauntered, sniffing, away.

Old-timer sat as though oblivious of the darkies' presence. Some of them were shuffling in the passage, uttering soft exclamations of delight, rolling their eyes and showing their strong white teeth. But presently jazz music palled on Old-timer and he moved the dials in quest of something different. He found a woman singer and dropped her like red-hot coals. He tried a lecture on modern fiction and, after a moment of amazed attention, ejected it with a snort. He heard a comic dialogue through to the end and waited hopefully for more.

But it was the time for news bulletins. Old-timer, catching the announcement, settled back with a feeling of contentment. He'd rather hear news bulletins than anything else—barring, maybe, a good banjo plunker.

The voice of the speaker came distinctly. First the Government's weather forecast; stormy, with more rain in Missouri and southern Illinois. Then an item from Washington; a reply to Britain's armament query had been dispatched by the State Department and its contents, according to reliable authority, were thus and thus and so. Then a local bit of news that made Old-timer sit up, all attention.

"St. Louis," said the voice. "The slayer of Mrs. Sophia Brinkman, beautiful daughter of the late Captain Eli Erskine, picturesque river character of the old steamboat days, eluded police and detectives who early this evening made a spectacular raid——"

Old-timer suddenly swore. A blur of static had cut in and for a few seconds the sounds were meaningless, but then they came distinctly again. "—had him trapped there," the voice continued, "but when they closed in on Waxler's refuge, they were astounded to find him gone. The ablest detectives of the police department are assigned to the task of finding him. Meanwhile sheriffs and peace officers for the entire surrounding territory have been warned of his escape."

There were other news bulletins—sporting results, a big fire in Jersey City, a spectacular airplane flight, a temperamental prima donna's refusal to sing—but Old-timer only half heard them in his absorption with the murder. It irritated him to know that the killer had got away. Texas Eli's handsome daughter, whom he could remember as a little baby! Only child of the fiery captain, whose last boat Oldtimer had "chiefed" on!

Somehow, it seemed incredible that anyone had dared to do this thing. The mere memory of Texas Eli should have been enough to deter the slayer. Certainly no man would have possessed the courage to

go through with it, the captain living. Old-timer shook his head and glanced out at the distant lightning.

"A-rantin' and ravin' his soul is to-night. Texas Eli he's out there in the thunder. Sure 'nough, I can just hear him a-bellerin' to lay holt of that fellow. A-rantin' he is and a-ravin'. Just itchin' to lay a-holt——"

Old-timer started as a series of vicious barks sounded a few yards forward. The dog was back at Hector Hanks' crate and its manner said clearly that this was no idle barking matter. Once again the engineer took up his lantern.

"Puppy, what-all you got there? What's Hector Hanks havin' shipped to him? What do you smell, hey? What makes you so dogged— By *gol,* that there paper wasn't tore like that afore!"

OLD-TIMER deliberated the matter as he moved about with his oil can. In an hour it would be midnight, when Sam Turley would come to relieve him. In an hour, then, he would be free to quit the engine-room and go in search of the captain. He would tell him there was something queer about that crate— and was it not consigned to Hector Hanks? No need to remind the captain what sort of man that Hanks was.

The storm had broken anew. Pitch black was the night, stabbed into vivid brightness when lightning struck through the heavens. Old-timer had intermittent glimpses of the river bank; tall cottonwoods, and drooping willows, and the gray waters of old Mississippi a-nibbling at their roots. Then utter darkness, as though the *Queen of Cairo* were sailing the River Styx. From the ammeter dial on his gauge board, Old-timer knew that the pilot had switched on the texas searchlight.

"Going to put her ashore," he surmised, and stood ready by his controls.

Presently from the forward guard he heard a startled cry. Then the engine signals jangled in a way that bespoke alarm. At the same instant a voice called down through the speaking trumpet, "Give her all you got, for God's sake!" and Old-timer promptly responded. The engines strained, the pitmen creaked, and the huge wheel beat the river as it thrashed into reverse. By a sudden lateral tremor he realized that the helm had been thrown hard over.

But it was too late. Old-timer lurched with the crash and was conscious of many things. He heard a brief rending sound amidships, the sound of darkies scuttling, the penned cows' plaintive lowing, the sound of shouting voices. There was an angry crack of thunder. Then the signal jangled an order and Old-timer halted his engines.

Less than a minute the packet drifted before he started the paddles to beating. Already there was a slightly perceptible settling to larboard; but by the time they had run her into the bank, the boat was decidedly listing.

There came a frantic call for the pumps, and Old-timer, methodical always, without undue haste set them throbbing. His partner, Sam Turley, appeared, buttoning his shirt as he ran. The mate's perspiring form was seen, vanished, was seen again. Words were shouted, oaths and orders. Old-timer, busy ministering to a wheezy pump, was suddenly aware of the river lapping at his ankles.

But it did not rise any higher. No more than a third of the deck was under water, the larboard side still high and dry, with the cows stretching eagerly out for a nibble of tender willow.

"They've got a canvas plaster over the side," Sam Turley shouted.

"Pumps are holdin' her," Old-timer nodded.

"Ain't a big hole. Snag wasn't big as it might've been."

"She'll be dry inside of an hour, barring somethin' maybe unlooked for."

"Yes, pumps'll hold for a fact."

"Dry inside of an hour," Old-timer said again.

The *Queen of Cairo* lay in slack water, nose upstream, on the Missouri bank of the river. Her wounded side had been run hard into the shore, which lifted it slightly and sustained it, causing the water that had poured through the gash to shift with a rush to starboard. As a consequence it was the uninjured side which now listed under, letting the river flow past the

guards to creep within a foot of the firebox.

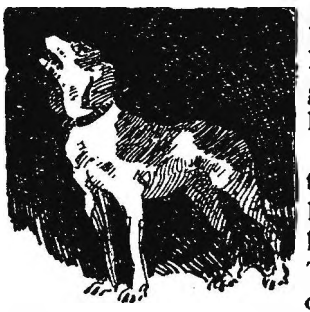
After a time the pumps began to make headway, and gradually the water receded. The rain had ceased, the storm passing eastward over Illinois; the crash of thunder was growing subdued and soothing with distance. For the first time in an hour Old-timer had leisure to light his pipe and look calmly about him.

With a start, then, he remembered Hector Hanks' crate.

"Soaked through!" Old-timer exclaimed, and thought of the paper wrapping. "I'll just have a look and see. I'll just pick at the paper; it's likely fell to pieces. I'll just —Well, here's the pup!"

The captain's dog pattered importantly down the passage, pausing here and there to smell the danger. But there was little time to waste with minor sniffings; the dog had a special mission. Its nose quivered critically. It nuzzled closer, one forepaw raised as it assayed the altered scent of the shipment.

"What is it, puppy?" Old-timer asked, and for answer the dog gave a whimper. Then it threw up its nose and howled. The engineer fetched his lantern.



"Somethin' funny," he muttered as he passed Sam Turley. "Addressed to Heck Hanks—can't be no good in it."

He reached far in, clawing between the slats at the pulplike paper. His hand touched something cold and damp. He grunted with amazement. They were fingers he held, human fingers!

Most of the darkies fled when they learned that a corpse was aboard. No matter, the *Queen of Cairo* had safely weathered her crisis. At last the captain was able to come and take charge of opening the crate. The chatter of voices mingled with the splintering of wood and the creaking of nails.

"Minute I saw who it was for I said no good could be in it. And then the pup——"

"I'll lay a dollar it's a woman."

"Drowned like a rat in a cellar. Just like a rat in a cellar!"

"Would've floated, though, if that other stuff didn't go and hold it down."

"Hand me that there claw hammer, Spike."

"Heck Hanks he's due for the su'prise of his life when he comes for his freight at the Cape."

"What in hell was his game, do you think?"

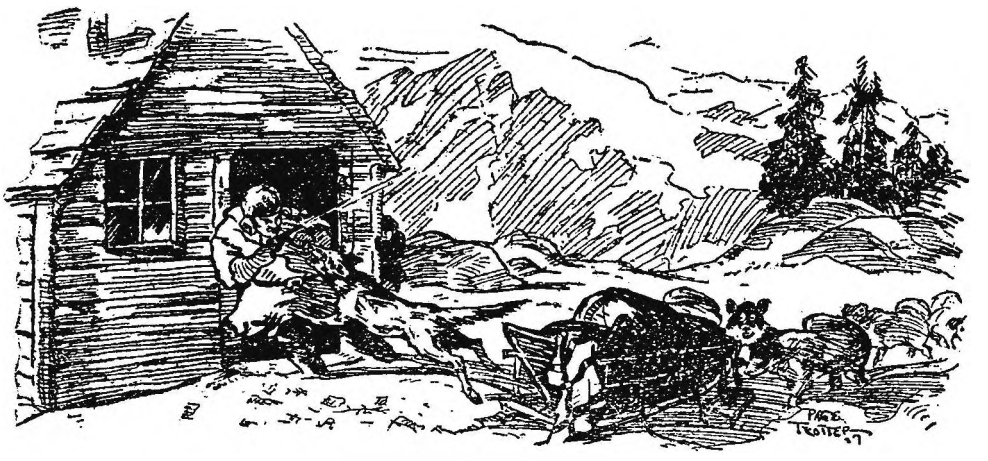
Then the last slat was jerked loose and the mate stooped down to pull away the wrapping. The bystanders crowded around, staring at the half revealed figure in the box. The mate tore another handful of soft, soaked paper, and the dead man's face was uncovered. Hector Hanks lay there before them!

"Hector Hanks, alias Waxler—" as the lieutenant of detectives wrote next day in his official report on the murder of Texas Eli's daughter.

Outside, the sun was smiling.

RAIN-IN-THE-FACE AS A "SWAPPER"

A MAN of my acquaintance, living in northwest Nebraska in the days following the great Sioux War of 1876, had two shot-guns but no rifle. In those days in that country, a dollar was a dollar and quite scarce. Business was carried on largely by barter. The possession of a rifle meant venison and smaller game. One day seeing Rain-in-the-Face, a Sioux chief, riding along with a rifle strapped to his saddle, the white man took his lighter shot-gun and went out to meet the old warrior. After a great deal of "dickering" concerning a dollar "to boot" to the Indian, they "swapped even." Elated and eager, the new owner of the rifle, which was in first-class shape, hurriedly mounted and rode to the nearest trader's store for ammunition. "Thirty-eights" were too small, "forty-fours" too large. The trader scratched his head, more carefully examined the baffling weapon, and announced his verdict. "Why, that thar gun is one of them old 'forties', that they ain't makin' cat'ridges for no more. It ain't worth nothin' 'cept to throw away." I had met Rain-in-the-Face, but this was a "new one" on me.



SNOW-MELT

By DEX VOLNEY

"WHEN THE SUN IS PUT OUT, THE STARS WILL SHINE," BROODED DAVE YARRON THROUGH THE BITTER COLD OF THE ALASKAN WINTER—AND HE MEANT THAT WHEN PETER WAS DEAD, YARRON WOULD WIN RUSSIAN MARY. BUT HE WAS WRONG

THE heavy chugging of a gasoline engine sounded loudly in the still evening air, and a black sea-weathered boat rounded the granite cliffs of Katen's Cove, where the incoming rollers of the Pacific Ocean thundered drowsily at the foot of Unga's single rambling street. Lines of blue codfishing dories bobbed easily at their moorings in the tiny inlet.

The incoming boat came to anchor and grew silent. A tall, gaunt bodied young man in a fox-fur coat and glossy black sableskin cap launched a punt over the stern. He sculled in skilfully through the little breakers to the rocky shingle. His face was sharp in feature, with a narrow, pointed jaw. His small dark eyes gleamed feverishly under his coal black brows, and his thin lipped mouth was drawn into a tight, straight line.

In the titanic shadows cast by the white capped peaks of the island mountains, now dyed red in the heatless rays of the setting Alaskan midwinter sun, he hastened up the snow banked street to the white painted residence of Ted MacCallum, the marshal.

" 'Tain't the marshal that Dave Yarron's goin' t' see," observed Long Gun Hooser knowingly, in response to a surprised remark in Soapy Komedal's pool hall. "It's Russian Mary livin' at the marshal's house what's eatin' the heart out of him. Well, she's pretty enough."

RUSSIAN MARY was indeed pretty enough. Tall and slender hipped, she was, with arching dark eyebrows over deep violet pools of eyes that glowed with Tartar fire, for there was a Tartar strain in her blood. As in her limbs and face, there was a wild beauty in her cold, musical voice.

"I told you before, Dave," she was saying. "It's no use, this coming again and again."

"You don't care for Peter Lowe——"

"Even if there were no rich old Peter Lowe with his furs and his schooners waiting for me, it still would not be any use, unless you had a big trading schooner of your own, and some thousands of money. Then, maybe—— I'll be no klootch! I have the beauty and I'll make my mark. Peter Lowe says so."

"Peter Lowe has a lot to say 'bout you!" burst out Dave Yarron, giving way to his spiritual agony in a harsh snarl. "He'll handle you like he's handled plenty of other good looking——"

There was a sudden sound of a chair violently thrown aside, within the house.

Then, with a heavy thud of booted feet, a big portly man, silvery haired at the temples and large in limb and feature, came out of the door. In his big, brown right hand he held an old forty-five six-gun, worn perfectly slick. He snapped it into a dead-level position at his waist, the muzzle pointing straight at the younger man's narrow chest.

"You'll eat them words or lead from this gun, Yarron. Which is it? Speak fast!"

Dave Yarron glared into the death promising muzzle of the slick old gun. Then his gaze shifted to Peter Lowe's questioning gray eyes, which seemed to be turning an icy blue. The young man's long, thin fingers clutched spasmodically at the cold air.

"I—I guess I don't know what I'm saying." The words came with difficulty, as if from a strangled throat.

Russian Mary stood coolly aside.

Peter Lowe looked straight into Dave Yarron's agonized burning eyes, and the hard expression on his own broad face softened a trifle.

"That's that, then. Everybody knows how me and Mary stand, but you. She's here with MacCallum and his wife all the time. When she's twenty in August, Old Judge has got to marry us. I'm takin' her to the States, to make her a lady for my house. I've a pile, and she has—herself. I've got what she wants an' she's got what I want. It's a straight deal, and no flim-flam. Why don't you stay away from here, before you get drilled?"

DAVE YARRON'S black boat chugged heavily as he made out of Katen's Cove. In a soft glow of icy moonlight, he headed northward. The white robed mountains of Unga and Popoff Islands loomed to port and starboard, forming a lofty gateway, through which he steered up the Straits of Nagai toward the ragged, broken ranges of the Alaskan peninsula.

The gaunt young trapper sat in the open cockpit of his throbbing, ice embroidered boat, hardly aware of the biting cold. The exhaust of his engine richochetted among the precipice of the shore.

Mary Lakov had accepted him coolly enough as the most energetic and hardest working prospective husband in the region. She had been fair enough to let him know she felt no special affection for him, but he had believed that she would learn to care for him. She hadn't hated him, either. Now, old Peter Lowe had stepped in and obscured him like a feeble star before the blaze of the sun. Old Peter Lowe, the biggest fur trader in western Alaska, generally got what he wanted.

Dave Yarron seldom had.

The rippling of the chilled water along the vibrating hull of his boat seemed to chant words into his half-frozen ears. "To him who hath shall be given—from him who hath shall be taken away."

There was bitter truth in that, Dave Yarron reflected. Anybody who would analyze life's facts and events would see it was the expression of some magnetic law that acted inexorably the world over.

He had planned and toiled, just as most other human beings toil and plan. It was all like the fantastic toy snow-villages fashioned by the Aleut children that lived in the smoky tundra-houses on the shores of the Bering Sea, toy clusters of *barrah-barrahs,* paths, tunnels, totems, elaborate and gorgeous things modelled out of glittering icy snow that sparkled and flashed as if nothing but diamonds—till the warm sun melted them down into collapsing heaps; and then they were gone and no man could see where they had been.

Dave Yarron skirted the mountainous shores of the mainland and headed up into Portage Bay, a deep inlet lying within a girding ring of snow flanked hills, now gleaming coldly in the moonlight. It was near midnight when he came ashore in his punt and walked toward his cabin, a black splotch in the prevailing silvery whiteness.

A few yards from the shack grew a single stunted fir. Beneath it paced an animal shape, supple and powerful. It looked like a great timber wolf. It turned, with a growl, as Dave Yarron's boots crunched on the frozen snow.

"Quiet, Yutka! What are you doing out here?"

The wolf-dog responded with a throaty snarl, and walked lithely around the trunk of the tree, his muzzle elevated.

Dave Yarron went toward the door of his cabin, glanced at the shattered hasp and padlock, and strode to the tree.

"Come down, you!" he commanded raspingly. He reached inside his red fox-fur coat and drew out a long-barreled gun.

"Make it fast, t'at tam tiger!" chattered a voice from the black shadows of the tree which sparkled with icicles in the moonlight.

"Down, Yutka! I've got him. Good boy!"

The short-eared beast paced off a few steps and flattened himself on his gray belly in the snow, his muzzle between his paws.

There came a crackling of a branch or two. Then, with a thud, a grotesque, misshapen figure dropped out of the tree onto the snow.

"Hunchbacked Polack! Hunchie! You turning thief?"

"I—Dave, I'm hungry."

"Then ask, don't steal. Come in!"

Dave Yarron led the way into his shack and lighted an oil lamp. Its smoky flame revealed a rude bunk spiked up at one end of the shanty, a rusty iron camp stove at the other, and between them a table covered with a piece of brownish colored oilcloth. Powerful traps littered the floor and the cold steel of a rifle-barrel gleamed bluely on the black boards of the wall. At the opposite side of the shack, the red and green and brown backs of several hundred books carefully arranged on half-a-dozen rude shelves produced a startlingly incongruous effect.

In the lamp light, Dave Yarron saw that the garment on the hunchback's leg was ripped, and smeared with blood.

"Yutka nearly got you, looks like. Hurt much?"

"No, Dave."

From a cupboard made of a packing box and spiked up on the wall over the camp stove, Dave Yarron pulled out a small side of bacon. He laid it on the table and cut it in two with a greasy, black handled knife. With the bacon, he put two heavy pieces of sourdough bread, and rolled the whole up in an old shirt.

"All right, Hunchie. I haven't got much. That's the best I can do."

DAVE YARRON sat on a dilapidated chair, with his arms thrown before him on the oilcloth covered table, dully listening to the crunching steps of the hunchbacked Polack dying away over the moonlight flooded snow outside.

With a swift padding sound, the wolf-dog thrust himself in through the partly open door. He growled warningly.

"No! Let him alone, Yutka!"

Like Dave, Hunchie had once made plans, too. A stalwart Pole he had been, four years ago, with a long line of traps and a slowly fattening poke. A flood of hot water from Pavlof Crater had produced a snowslide, burying him under a mass of boulders and steaming slush. He came back from the mission hospital at Dutch Harbor the misshapen, broken wreck he was. Had a klootch and kids, too, poor devils.

But Dave Yarron's thoughts could not stay away long from his own unhappiness. Indeed, the pain was there in his subconsciousness all the time, like an aching tooth. He arose to his gaunt height, and began to pace the floor. The wolf-dog stood silently and watched.

The man's shoulders drooped, his thin face was peaked, his lips were tight as a trap. His black eyes smoldered and his bony fingers gripped the fur of his fox coat tensely.

He felt no desire to eat or sleep. He thumbed over the red and green and brown backs of the books along the wall, and pulled one down. Chinese philosophy in terse bits it was. There was much in it he had found good. Nothing there, however, could help him now. He riffled the pages with his long, thin steely fingers. Then he stopped. A sentence stared up at him: *When the sun is put out, the stars will shine.*

That was it. The thought had been dormant in his mind all the way over from Unga Island. Extinguish the brilliant blaze of Peter Lowe, and Mary Lakov would

again see his own modest gleam.

The world was essentially ruthless, Dave Yarron had observed. One was an eater, or one was eaten. And one got what one wanted by sheer action. Every man's victory was purely a tenacious, brutal slugging, whether the action were physical or not. You could let nothing stand in your way.

Of course, if anything happened to Peter Lowe, there would be a stir. He was no shabby trapper fighting his way from set to set in the face of snow and wind. Couldn't boldly wipe out a man like that and get away with it not even on the Alaskan peninsula, where the arm of the law is generally outreached. And Mary Lakov would never forgive that.

Dave Yarron sat gripped by his thoughts. His toil worn fingers scratched the close fur on the hard skull of the wolf-dog standing beside him. The beast's huge body fairly filled the shanty. His tail was bushy, his head wide and flat on top, and very short eared; in his eyes lurked yellow and greenish tinges.

The savage animal quivered under the trapper's absently scratching fingers, his muscles sliding like flat steel springs under his gray-furred skin, a throaty snarl in his throat. He was Dave Yarron's lead dog, a ferocious creature that had proved absolutely unmanageable in the hands of a Russian-Aleut, who had been glad to give him away to Dave Yarron for nothing. Dave had studied the dog's psychology and he could handle the animal, though he had to be careful.

PETER LOWE landed in the cold, wintry sunlight that glinted blindingly on the snow aproned slopes of the ragged mountains surrounding Portage Bay. He was clad in a fur parka that, on his portly figure, rather resembled an enormous shaggy red skirt and bonnet.

He got ashore a team of eleven big huskies, a long sledge and three heavy bundles of dried salmon and provisions. Then the boat made off in the hands of its Aleut skipper toward Unga Island, which lay like a gigantic frosted white cake out in the sea. Peter Lowe harnessed up, and mushed inland, along the rim of the bay.

He passed near Dave Yarron's shack, where the gaunt young trapper's unharnessed sledge-malemutes strolled about silently, watching the passage of the fur trader's team. All of them but Yutka.

Dave Yarron held him inside the nearly closed door of the shanty. The young man's long right arm was extended horizontally past the wolf-dog's head, ending in pointing bony fingers aimed straight at the huge receding figure of Peter Lowe. From the trapper's thin, bitter lips darted a continuous stream of curses, half Aleut, half English. With the rod-like fingers of his left hand he slowly stroked the animal's coarse fur the wrong way, drawing his arm toward the beast's short, stubby ears.

"Watch him, Yutka! The *asheedooden!* Girl-taker! Fat-bellied weasel! Watch him!"

The dog shivered with rage under the reversed brushing of the fur along his spine by Yarrow's steely fingers. He snarled throatily, but did not move, for the man had now placed his right hand restrainingly against the animal's chest.

"That's only the first lesson, Yutka," muttered the gaunt young trapper.

Peter Lowe was starting on a midwinter trip up the northern side of the peninsula to his important buying station at Port Heidon, on the Bering Sea. Under the portly fur magnate's parka Dave Yarron knew there must be a skin bag containing at least fifteen thousand dollars in five and twenty-dollar gold pieces, and probably a pair of heavy six-shooters. In a month he would be back with an empty poke and a groaning sledge-load of furs, red fox, cross fox, martens. Other men might run Lowe's schooners, but he liked to buy his own skins, always.

"JUMP him, Yutka! Peter Lowe! Peter Lowe! Peter Lowe. The *asheedooden!* Jump him!"

Dave Yarron had manufactured a crude and absurd looking effigy of Peter Lowe, consisting of a sewed-up sledge tarpaulin

and a pair of trousers, stuffed with skins. Over it he had thrown a shaggy red parka of coarsely stitched fox-furs.

It hung by its grotesquely long canvas neck on a rope lashed to a rafter overhead. In one of its bulging, shapeless cloth hands swung a poke full of pebbles, in the other was tied a whip. In a strangely caricatured fashion, it did resemble Peter Lowe.

"Peter Lowe! The skunk! Grizzly! Fox! Hyena! Jump him! Get his throat. You hear, Yutka! His throat!"

Dave Yarron got down on his bony hands and knees and shuffled over the floor before the stuffed figure. Then, crouching a moment, he sprang up at it and pretended to sink his narrow, light teeth into its canvas neck.

Again and again he did that. As he had done the day before, he ruffled Yutka's fur by drawing his hard fingers up the beast's spine, swiftly setting him into a quivering rage.

Cautiously, the trapper reached down into the pits of the wolf-dog's powerful forelegs and urged him to leap. The dog stood motionless, his muscles trembling, and growling deep in his throat.

The man straightened up and slowly rubbed his fingers across the throat of the effigy, with a clawing gesture. Then he stepped behind the strange-looking thing.

"Yutka! Come here!"

Watchfully, the beast paced up and stood before Dave Yarron and the suspended figure. His lips were drawn back from over his terrible fangs and his eyes were blazing.

The trapper gingerly gripped the whip-hand of the dummy. With a quick, deft flirt, he sent the lash flicking across the twitching snout of the animal.

"Get him, Yutka! His throat! Peter Lowe! Peter Lowe!"

With a frightful snarl, the wolf-dog leaped through the air upon the effigy, ripped the stuffing out of its cloth neck in a single tearing slash of his fangs, and bore the grotesque object to the floor.

THE moonlight shimmered on the snow in the transpeninsular defile of Kotzee Pass. Gigantic rocks cast dark shadows on the sparkling white surface of the frozen ground. Among them stood a small deserted cabin, a tumbling object, in the last stages of decay. A little ways to one side, there was a harnessed team of whining and growling dogs, their abandoned sledge snubbed to a stunted bush. There was no driver in sight. The lead-dog, too, was missing from the running-gear.

From down the trail came the steely rasp of another approaching outfit. The big eleven-dog team of Peter Lowe pulled wearily up the defile. The trader trudged behind his sledge, a huge oscillating shaggy figure in the icy glare of the moonlight.

He stopped in front of his trail cabin, and at once began to unharness. He had had a hard pull up into the pass through fresh snow and was making this shelter very late. Still his sledge was not heavily loaded, as the Port Heidon trappers were having an unlucky winter. He was returning with more gold than skins.

Suddenly he straightened up from the task of getting out some dried salmon for his dogs from a bundle on his sled. The animals stood with bristling manes, growling at the other team up the defile. The next instant, he thought he espied a grotesque looking figure skulking behind his shanty. Then, from among the upreared rock masses of the wide pass, he clearly heard a low, vibrant voice, strangely familiar in tone, flinging curses at him and calling his name—"Peter Lowe! Peter Lowe! Jump him—"

Peter Lowe whirled about, bewilderingly, but quickly snatching at his slick old guns.

A huge, lithe gray creature that resembled a leaping timber-wolf crashed against his shoulders. Peter Lowe saw the low flat skull, wide between its short triangular ears, and the back-drawn lips on the animal's open snout, revealing its parted fangs. His guns came up, too late, stabbing hot red fingers of fire into the sky in a roaring, futile song, as the wolf-dog bore him down. He hardly groaned when the ferocious beast's teeth sank into his throat. The wolf-dog gave a violent, slashing jerk. Peter Lowe's head dropped back on his broad shoulders, as if it were hung on a very flexible hinge. A spasmodic fountain,

black in the moonlight, spurted from his throat, ran over his garments, and spread out on the snow.

Peter Lowe's own dogs had stood about, staring, quiveringly. Now, taking their cue from the killer-wolf, they rushed in upon the body of the trader, with throaty snarls, and began snapping and tearing at it. A man down among a team of huskies, and attacked by one of their number, will usually have the others upon him in a twinkling. It is the way they fight, the pack-running instinct of the wolf in them manifesting itself.

Peter Lowe's garments were slashed to tatters by the canine teeth. A poke was ripped apart, and gold coins strewed the snow, some of them smeared with wet blood.

"Down, Yutka! Down, there! Good boy! Mush, malemutes! Clear out of this!" The speaker's voice quavered and broke, coming in harsh gasps. The dogs slunk aside, and stood watching.

Dave Yarron jerkily seized the torn poke, and snatched up all he could find of the coins scattered on the snow. From the dead man's sledge he took three tightly-rolled bundles of skins, transferring them to his own outfit. As he walked, he continually dragged his musher-clad feet sideways, so as to destroy his tracks.

With some difficulty, he got Yutka into harness, and forged rapidly up the lonely defile in the chill moonlight.

From behind the shanty among the black upreared rocks crept forth a squat, hunch-backed figure. Coming forward, it pawed over the abandoned sledge, and the dead body lying on the snow, like a weird, lurking ghoul.

BY THE embers of a dying fire, Dave Yarron lay in his fur-lined sleeping-bag. He had made the rounds of his trap-lines as if nothing had happened, and was nearly back to Portage Bay. He had taken his time, camping at Herendeen two weeks to set out a new string of traps along the side of a small canyon where he had found numerous trails.

He was in no hurry. There would be a great stir at Unga, he knew. He wanted to wait until his nerves had settled before coming in again, even as near as the Portage.

His dogs were all about him, buried almost to their snouts in the snow, to escape the chill wind that was sweeping among the desolate mountain wastes. He could see their short ears in the flickering gleams of the fire. They were fast asleep.

Dave Yarron was not afraid to sleep within reach of his huskies. He understood them; felt a good deal of affection for them, and controlled them perfectly. All but Yutka. It had always taxed his skill and patience to handle that great ferocious animal, purely wolf-natured as he was.

Since the night in Kotzee Pass he had acted very peculiarly; continually full of low, throaty snarls, and with a hot glare in his greenish-tinged eyes. Once or twice Dave Yarron had been obliged to menace the animal with his rifle, or with the long, keen skinning knife that he habitually kept in his shirt, ready to hand.

The trapper had about made up his mind that he would have to kill Yutka. He peered about at the muzzles in the snow. He could not see Yutka's there.

There was a swift scratch of padded feet. Dave Yarron saw the hurtling gray body of the killer-wolf coming straight at his throat in the red firelight.

With a convulsive jerk, the gaunt young trapper clasped his left hand over his own throat, with his sharp elbow protruding to fend off the animal's fangs. As the wolf-dog crashed upon him, he whipped out his skinning-knife. He drove it to the hilt into the killer's stomach, ripped him through the bowels, with one long terrible slash.

Yutka sank in a writhing heap upon the snow, bathing his master with his warm blood, his fangs buried in the muscles of the man's upthrust left arm.

Dave Yarron shook off the sagging heavy body of the wolf-dog and scrambled hastily to his feet. His other huskies had started astonishedly out of their icy beds. Now they slunk down again, and lay still.

Dave Yarron stood shaking from head to foot. His nerves were fairly jumping. The blood-bathed knife in his hand was gripped so tightly that he could scarcely let go of it.

He clumsily bandaged up his bitten arm. The injury, though intensely painful, had bled itself clean. He thanked his stars he had killed Yutka. Should have done that before—immediately after the night in Kotzee Pass. The dog, full of boundless ferocity and possessed with the killer lust after tasting human blood, had been nothing but a deadly menace ever since.

The gaunt young trapper crept back into his sleeping-bag, but remained wide awake, while his huskies slept. He resolved he would go to Unga, now. They would soon be selling Petr Lowe's estate at auction. He would go and buy Peter Lowe's smartest schooner, the *Unimak,* and go trading on the north shores of the Bering Straits—right on the fur-king's most profitable route, which would fall to the buyer of the vessel, inevitably.

He had the gold to outbid most any comer; his own hoard and the poke he had acquired at Kotzee Pass. The rolls of skins he had added to his own meager bundle were worth money, too, though he could not break those out all at once.

Mary Lakov would soon surrender to him, in her high-handed way. Maybe she didn't love him, but—well, she would. She was too fiery natured not to, eventually.

DAVE YARRON'S black, sea-weathered boat made into Katen's Cove. The heavy chugging of his engine was muffled in the thin, blizzardly swirl of snow that was sweeping over the dark and desolate bay. He landed in his punt, almost capsizing in the angry rollers on the shingle, and hurried up through the icy, rambling street to the house of Ted MacCallum, the marshal.

"Mary—but haven't you heard about Peter Lowe? Throat torn out by his dogs, over in Kotzee Pass. First we thought he'd fallen with a bad heart. But his poke was missing. All his skins, and his provisions and guns were gone, too. That showed dirty work. Then the Hunchbacked Polack was caught tryin' to trade one of Peter Lowe's old slick guns for a sack of flour. Admits he took the guns off the body, but denies he got the skins and poke. Says he saw the huskies jump on old Lowe when he was down in a fit, and swears no man had anything to do with it. But we've got him back of the house here, in the jail.

"Mary—Mary's rich. Peter Lowe had a will. He left her every damn' thing. She sold the outfit, lock, stock, and barrel to Soapy Komedal for thirty thousand dollars. She has the old man's three hundred thousand in liberty bonds, in Seattle. She went out on the last mail schooner—hardly'd speak to us, when she left. Talk about a stuck-up Siwash! Well, guess she'll make her mark outside. We're going to swing Hunchie tomorrow in front of the courthouse. What's the matter, Dave? Sick over Mary? Well, no use taking it so hard."

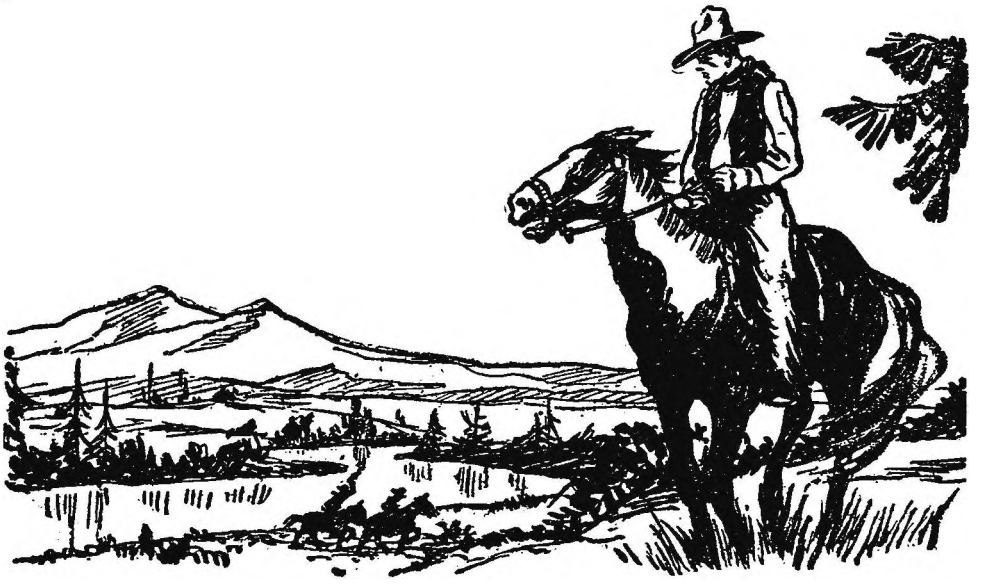
Dave Yarron stood alone, an hour later, in a squalid room he had hired up on the second floor of Soapy Komedal's Hotel.

An iron bedstead supported a damp mattress and a couple of grimy blankets. On the table, gaunt-bodied young trapper laid a scrawled piece of paper. It read:

I got Peter Lowe with my dog, Yutka. Let that poor devil of a Hunchie go. Even granite becomes dust, while snow melts in a day. Dave Yarron.

He took out his long-barreled revolver, thrust the muzzle between his frothy thin lips, bit violently into the cold steel till his small teeth snapped, and jerked the trigger.

And, though it was a suicide, Old Judge Driscoll, who was also something of a physician, said that Dave Yarron was infected with rabies from a bite in his arm, and would have died within a week, anyway.



ACES AND EIGHTS

By PAUL SAND

Author of "The Galloping Clue," "Headwork," etc.

WHEN CHICK TIMMONS OF THE POT HOOK R WAS DROPPED, THE KILLER LEFT HIS USUAL TRADE MARK—ACES AND EIGHTS. LATER, WHEN ACES AND EIGHTS WERE FOUND MISSING FROM HIS OWN PACK OF CARDS, SHERIFF HAMMET GOT EVEN BUSIER THAN EVER—AND LEARNED WHAT HE NEVER EXPECTED TO

SAM REED poised his pistol and fired. "Chick" Timmons, who stood whispering across the bar to "Baldy" Hendricks, gave a cry and fell in a heap on the floor, his face buried in the crook of his right arm.

The Saturday night crowd at Baldy's place half rose from the tables and stood aghast. They were the fancier gamblers of Piquo, winners, generally, of many smaller games around town and at the neighboring ranches, and met here for real stakes against foemen worthy of their steel. Cowboys and small ranchers, armed and suspicious, they were not unused to having bullets occasionally interrupt their play; but this was different.

Sam and Chick had not been gambling tonight. There had been no argument, no hard words. They were, so far as any one knew, the best of friends. Sam Reed was the son of Old Man Ben Reed, who had staked him out to a fat little ranch in the lower end of the county.

Some didn't like Sam because of the easy prospects he had, especially as he swaggered in fancy leather and silver spurs with a half sneer on his thin, handsome face. His free spending and caustic wit made him a leader among the young folk of the county socially. He was supposed to be engaged to Pop Pierce's girl, Helen, which was an honor in itself. Chick Timmons, though merely a happy-go-lucky cowhand from the Pothook R, was his ready and willing interlocutor on all occasions when they were together.

Sam wore an engraved, pearl-handled revolver, which he often brandished and which he frequently let fly when brandishing did not attract enough attention; but Sam had never been known to kill a man. Tales of prowling Mexicans and Indians slain came from his own lips, but they were both unconfirmed and unimportant.

His own deed now seemed to take him

by surprise, yet he was remarkably calm. He laid his smoking gun down on the bar and raised his hands.

"Bring on the handcuffs, gents," he said. "I reckon there's no use beatin' around the bush!"

George Graham, one of the older men present, picked up the pearl-handled revolver. "Go get the sheriff," he suggested to one of the crowd.

"Sheriff's over in Running Bear," remarked Sam calmly. "His tenderfoot deputy, though, is upstairs trippin' the light fantastic toe, if any. Get him."

"Hammet, you mean? All right, get him."

They didn't have to get him. As Graham spoke, a heavyset young man, whose serious eyes and stern tight mouth offset the boyishness of a clear, ruddy complexion, entered the front door and looked swiftly about. Hen Hammet was a comparatively recent arrival in Lavera County, where a tenderfoot deputy was indeed a novelty; but most of the inhabitants had become fairly well convinced that Hammet had not left his job as a city police detective because of his inefficiency. Probably they never would have thought so if his own plea of poor health had not been so improbable for a husky, hard working hombre like Hammet.

THE sight of the prostrate figure by the bar and of Sam Reed with his hands carelessly raised made the ex-policeman's usually blank face pucker in a frown of more than mere surprise. Hammet, this very evening, was the beneficiary of a quarrel between Sam Reed and Helen Pierce. But for the pistol shot, Hammet would have still been upstairs in Helen's company, where piano, fiddle and trap drum beguiled the feet of cowboys and their lady friends.

Hammet would enjoy nothing better than to eliminate this young rancher from the field of Helen's attentions, if it could be done honorably. From the looks of things, fate had played into his hands. After the first gleam of surprise, however, he tried to suppress his personal feeling and proceed to work with a thoroughly impersonal attitude.

"Did you do this?" he asked simply.

"Why do you reckon they got me standin' here?" retorted Sam. "Get out your bracelets. I'm tired holdin' my arms up."

"I got no handcuffs here," said Hammet. "You can put your hands down, if you want. This your gun?"

"Looks like it, don't it?"

Hammet examined the expensively mounted revolver.

"What did you do it for, Sam?"

"So our tenderfoot sleuthhounds would have some work to do!"

One or two men laughed at the incredible sarcasm. Hammet's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. There was something queer about Sam's conduct. Hammet had run into flippant killers before, but none with the easy assurance of Sam Reed. Such ready confession pointed to an early well planned get-away. As Hammet bent over to examine the body on the floor, he was careful to go around so as to keep Sam in his line of vision.

Hammet was surprised to find Chick Timmons' pulse still active.

"Somebody went for a doctor, I s'pose?" he remarked. "The man's still alive."

Several went out in response to the suggestion.

Hammet's nimble fingers loosened Chick's clothing to locate the wound. He was puzzled to find no trace of blood anywhere on the torso. He turned quickly to the head, where the matted hair might have concealed a serious wound. At that instant the apparently unconscious victim broke into wild, almost hysterical laughter. He opened his eyes and sat up, hardly able to control his mirth.

"Mister Deputy," he managed to say, "you got the most ticklin'est fingers I ever run into!"

Hammet drew back at the first burst of laughter. As it flashed upon him that he was being made the butt of a joke, his face snapped back into a set, grim mask of immovable muscle.

Sam Reed's shrill cackle almost broke through the iron control that had been drilled into the tenderfoot in quite different surroundings. The personal ridicule was bad enough; Hammet felt even more

keenly the dangerous possibilities of getting himself laughed at as an officer of the law.

HAMMET stood in the center of the roaring crowd, fighting silently his rise in temperature. As the uproar subsided, he began to cool. Gradually a grin spread over his stolid features.

"You win, Sam," he said finally. "Here's your gun. Don't start any real trouble."

The crowd gave way for him as he walked out.

Sam Reed slapped his thigh in ecstasy.

"Did you see his face!" he chortled, leaning on Chick for support. "Did you see it!"

"I couldn't," protested the resurrected victim. "I was laughin' too hard. But he didn't get as sore about it as I figgered he would."

"He didn't have the guts!" rejoined Sam vindictively. "I was jest waitin' for the chance to clean him up if he'd raised a hand."

"He should 'a' stood the drinks."

"He's a piker," scoffed Sam. "I'll pay. It was worth it to see his face! Set 'em up all around, Baldy."

The drinks were drunk and the gamblers returned to their games, blandly chuckling. In a half hour they had to all appearances forgotten the incident, except for an echo of it here and there. In a half hour they had something more serious to think about.

The back door opened suddenly and a man entered. He was above medium height and correspondingly broad. He wore a brown wool shirt and leather chaps. A rattlesnake skin encircled his hat, which was pulled down level with his eyes. Below his eyes his face was hidden behind a blue bandanna.

As he stepped inside he challenged the assembly with a guttural command. Nobody quite remembered afterward what it was, but all knew the general meaning of the two levelled revolvers and their hands went instinctively upward.

"Don't nobody twitch a finger that wants to live!" growled the intruder.

"It's another joke!" muttered somebody.

"Hammet's tryin' to get even," whispered Chick Timmons to the man next to him. "Watch me pepper between his legs!"

The cowboy reached for his gun. In almost the same movement he slumped down in the chair in which he had been playing. The masked man's pistol had spoken, and Chick was not acting now. If this were a return joke by the tenderfoot deputy, it was an extremely grim one. Blood spurted from the base of the cowboy's neck and his face was too white for pretense.

"Anybody else?" snarled the intruder.

He waved a gun at Baldy.

"Come out from behind that bar!" he ordered. "Get over against the wall with the rest of 'em!"

Baldy obeyed.

"You!" snapped the unknown, jerking his head at Sam Reed. "Slip off that belt an' lock the front door! Now clean off them tables! Put the jack on the bar."

At the sight of Chick Timmons in ugly, unfeigned death, Sam's face had turned ashen. At this command, he stood as if paralyzed, then obeyed as if but a fraction of his powers had been restored. Mechanically he scooped the money from the tables and piled it on the counter. It ran into thousands.

"Now go back an' frisk that bunch o' gophers, an' yerself too! Then empty the till."

This done, the dictator deliberately returned one gun to its holster and fished a canvas bag out of his shirt bosom.

"Put it in that!"

Sam did so, and the other thrust the heavy bag back into his shirt.

"Stand in front o' me," he directed Sam. "When I go out, shut this door after me an' lock it! Lock it—get me!—an' throw the key in that-ar spittoon. My hoss is out here right in line with this-here door, an' if it opens inside o' five minutes, I'll pour lead through it!"

He backed out of the open door, gun last.

"Lock it!" he yelled.

Sam slammed the door shut, but he did not lock it. Instead he rushed back to the bar, snatched his pearl-handled gun, and threw open the door in defiance of the parting warning. He fired quickly, but the night was dark compared with the brilliance indoors and the bandit had wasted no time. Sam emptied his gun at a distant shadow, but without result.

The crowd poured out through both rear and front doors, yelling, cursing and firing helplessly at the faintest target.

In the entrance to the dance hall, which was separate from that of the bar, appeared the tenderfoot deputy sheriff.

"Cut out that shootin'!" he commanded. "You'll hurt somebody with your foolin'."

"Foolin', hell!" growled one. "Feller cleaned out the place, an' shot Chick Timmons to boot!"

Hammet grinned. "Sam Reed, I s'pose!"

"Sam Reed be damned! Come see fer y'self! If you was any dam' good, you'd go after this feller an' get him!"

There was a ring of sincerity in their voices that shook his cautious skepticism. They would hardly try to fool him twice in the same hour! He stepped down and entered the barroom to make sure. One glance at Chick Timmons' body was enough.

"Send for Sheriff Bailey," he ordered. "He's over at Running Bear. What happened this time? Didn't he know it was loaded?"

They pieced together their information until he had the story in fairly logical shape. He was impatient at their inability to describe the bandit.

"You say he had on a hat an' a shirt an' pants an' chaps an' a handkerchief over his face. What kind? What color? Couldn't you see his eyes?"

They agreed that they could, but they disagreed on their color and other details.

SAM REED had little to say. He had lost some of his assurance. He could see that it amused Hammet that he had been selected to assist the holdup, though his daring in pursuing the bandit had wiped out some of the ignominy of being forced to empty his friends' pockets.

The deputy made a careful examination of Timmons' body. As he was busily engaged, his alert ear caught the words of a man who was the center of a clump of men near the front door.

"Sure I seen him," the man was saying, "jest as plain almost as I'm a-lookin' at you! When I seen him a-tyin' that mask acrost his nose, I knowed he was up to somethin'!"

Hammet stood up quickly and strode through the crowd to the man, whose name was Clem Milsen.

"Who are you talkin' about?" demanded Hammet.

"Why, this stick-up feller, o' course!" replied Milsen, whom Hammet could see had been drinking but was sober enough to talk straight. The man seemed to enjoy the attention he commanded.

"Did you say you saw him put on his mask?"

"Sure I did, jest as plain, almost, as I see you!"

"Where?"

"He was outside lookin' in the winder."

"Where were you?"

"Next door, in the back room o' Hosy's barber shop. I'd been sleepin'. I woke up sorta gradjal, an' took notice to this feller peekin' in the winer o' Baldy's place here. While I was a-watchin' him, I seen him tie a han'kerchief acrost his face."

"What kind of a lookin' man was he?"

"Big feller. He had a big nose pushed down flat on his face, an' a mustache."

"What color was the mustache?"

"Looked black to me."

"Was he dark complected too?"

"Yeah. Almost like an Injun."

"How about his eyes?"

"I couldn't tell much about his eyes," confessed Milsen.

"Mouth?"

"Well, it was shut."

"Shut!" repeated Hammet. "Is that all you can say about it?"

"Well, it was a powerful mean-lookin' mouth!"

"Have any chin?"

"Sure, hed a chin, a mean chin!"

"Did you notice his ears?"

"They was like everybody's ears, I reckon."

"Come out back," directed Hammet," an' show me jest where you were an' jest where he was."

The throng followed them out into the darkness to verify the details of the account so far as possible. Hammet was rejoiced to find beneath the window the bandit was said to have peered through a few footprints that had not been trampled into nothing.

"Do you think you'd know him if you saw him again?" asked Hammet as they went back into the barroom.

"Sure I would. Fact is," added the witness knowingly, "I kinda reco'nized him when I saw him."

"What! You know him?"

The witness suddenly became confused. His glance dropped and shifted uneasily.

"I—I ain't so sure," he stammered. "No, I reckon not!"

"Maybe not absolutely," urged Hammet persuasively, "but who did it look like?"

"Nobody I know," answered Milsen quickly. "Nobody at all!"

The sudden transition from glibness to hesitation and denial astonished Hammet. He stared at Milsen and saw beads of sweat stand out on his flushed face.

"What's the matter, man?" he exclaimed. "Are you scared to say his name? You told us enough what he looked like! Speak up!"

Milsen did not answer. His fingers twitched and clenched uneasily and his shifting eyes sought them repeatedly. No one had noticed that he held something tightly in one hand.

HAMMET seized his wrist and Clem's hand opened. Every one who could get a look was amazed to see several apparently ordinary playing cards. On the top one, which happened to be the ace of diamonds, was scrawled in pencil a sentence of two words:

Shut up!

"Where'd you get those?" asked Hammet.

"I—I don't know!"

"You don't know!" glared Hammet indignantly. "Are you crazy? Or do you think I am?"

"I mean I don't know where they come from! Somebody stuck 'em in my hand jest a minute ago!"

"In here?" frowned Hammet.

"Out there," nodded Milsen, "in the dark."

Hammet paused a moment.

"What does the writin' on that card mean, do you think?" he asked.

"Reckon it means what it says!" gulped Milsen.

"About this bandit, you mean?"

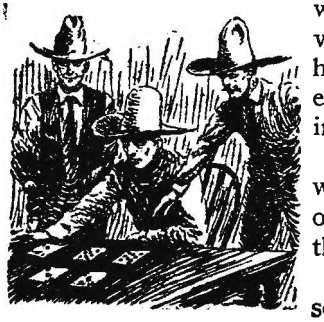
"What else?"

"But the man's not around now, is he?" demanded Hammet.

Milsen looked about as if he was afraid the man he had seen might meet his eye.

"No—no, I reckon not. But—but somebody must be!"

Hammet had reached that conclusion himself. His first thought was that the bandit had had the incredible audacity to return and give this advice, but now it was quite obvious that he had a confederate or friend in the crowd.



"Is there any writing on the others?" asked the deputy.

To look, Milsen spread the cards.

"Aces and eights!" ejaculated some one in awed tones.

"The 'dead man's hand!'"

"Killer Kid's trade mark!"

"What's that?" queried Hammet, puzzled.

"Aces and eights," they explained. "The 'dead man's hand,' they call it. Everybody does. Always has."

"But about Killer Kid?" persisted Hammet. He had heard of that notorious assassin even in the distant East.

"Killer Kid left aces and eights stuck in that marshal's mouth that he killed."

"He always leaves 'em," added somebody else. "It's his trade mark."

"Did you ever hear of him leavin' 'em as a warnin'?" asked Hammet.

Nobody ever had. "The Killer don't gen'rally give no warnin'," they agreed; "but he might."

Hammet turned to Clem Milsen. "Did this feller look like Killer Kid?"

"I never seen Killer Kid," protested Milsen. "An' I never wanta!"

Hammet searched the swarm of faces around him. There was no hint that any of them had passed the warning to Milsen. There was certainly no one present such as Milsen had described.

"Did anybody see anybody put those cards in Clem's hand?" was the only question Hammet could think of.

Nobody had seen anything.

Hammet thought instinctively of fingerprints before he realized how thoroughly smudged the cards would be. There was no hope in that direction.

Word came that the sheriff was on his way. Hammet, with Milsen in tow, went upstairs to hunt for Helen and explain why he had not returned; but the dance had broken up and Helen had apparently gone home with some relative or, as Hammet thought more than likely, with some obliging young fellow with time on his hands.

After Sheriff Bailey arrived and heard the outline of events on the ground, the two officers took Clem Milsen to the privacy of the sheriff's office.

"Now, Clem," began the sheriff, "let's get down to business. I been purty easy with you on that prop'ty o' yours out there. I let alone one or two shady deals I might ha' looked into a leetle harder. It's your turn now. You're fixed so you can do the county a heap o' help in catchin' this feller an' puttin' him where he belongs. You've said what he looks like an' we want you to stick by that at the trial. But you told Hen Hammet here you knew this feller. Now don't get scart at this card business. Who was he?"

Milsen hesitated. The sheriff grew impatient.

"Say, Clem," he snapped, "if ye're so scart o' this feller, s'posin' I turn yuh loose with the gang over at Baldy's an' tell 'em yuh wouldn't say the word to help get their money back? What do yuh reckon they'd do with you?"

"I—tell yuh, Sheriff," stammered the reluctant witness, "reason I'm uncertain ain't that. I'm scart. I b'lieve I know the man. I seen him onct or twice—but I couldn't take no oath in him."

"Who do yuh *think* it was?"

"Tait, his name is. I seen him a coupla times up to Cullum Gap, where they're sinkin' them mines, but I wouldn't want——"

"There's two of 'em," put in the sheriff "Brothers. Which one was this?"

"The one they call 'Horse.'"

THE sheriff nodded. "Horace, his name is. I've heard o' him. Bad actor. I got notices to keep an eye on him, but he ain't never been around when I been up at Cullum Gap. Way you described him seems to fit purty good. Tomorrer you an' us'll take a ride up to Cullum Gap an' identify him fer sure—if he's around. We'll start——"

"Sheriff," objected Clem, worried, "I don't want to go to Cullum Gap."

"Huh?"

"How 'bout you arrestin' him on the dope I give yuh, an' then I can come 'round to the jail an' see him, if I have to?"

"Yeah, that would be the i-deel arrangement," agreed the sheriff sarcastically. "Look here, Clem; when you 'pear against fellers like this, you take some risk, I 'low; but what the hell about us that's got to be chasin' 'em all the time? We ain't got no better guns than what you got!"

"You get paid for it," objected Milsen.

"By gorry, that's a fact!" conceded the sheriff, spitting copiously. "I mighty near fergot that! Well, tomorrer, Clem, we'll all get paid. I'll fix it up fer you to get witness's expenses. Man, you'll be gettin' 'most as much as I will! By the way. Hammet lives out your way now. He can take yuh home an' see nobody hurts you. He gets paid by the day."

"He don't have to do that," said Milsen uncertainly. "But if y'are goin' past my place," he added to Hammet, "mebbe it'd be safer if we went together."

"Sure," agreed Hammet. "I'll ride along. It's not much outa my way."

As they were leaving, the sheriff pulled his deputy to one side.

"I was rubbin' it in on that bird," he whispered, nodding toward Milsen. "He ain't got no call to be scart, but it'll be jest as well if he's a leetle extry careful. I'd keep my eye peeled tonight, if I was you. Not only fer him but fer m'self too."

But they arrived at Milsen's unkempt

little cabin without mishap, without even seeing a human being or the suspicion of one.

"See yuh tomorrow!" waved Hammet cheerfully as he rode off.

The remainder of the ride, to Hammet's own little shack near Smile Canyon, was even more lonesome. Hammet did not forget the sheriff's warning to keep a sharp lookout, but the weight of his thought was on other things. Was Helen offended that he had left her so abruptly? She shouldn't be. She knew his duty. But was she? And with whom had she eventually gone home?

Helen was a hard girl to figure out. He was sure she liked him pretty well. She had even taken seriously his thinly-veiled hints about marriage. She had dropped some hints of her own. That was why he had scraped up enough to buy this place near Smile Canyon and had turned his idle thoughts to the ways and means of making it pay enough, with what little he got from the county, to be a home for two.

Old Man Pierce, he knew, kept Helen from losing sight of the practical, even if Helen had been impulsive enough to throw herself at him just because she liked his looks or his reputation as a right smart deputy sheriff. That was where Sam Reed and one or two others had it on him. Sam's father had staked him to a nice herd of cows that seemed to grow and prosper even under Sam's casual hand.

After all, maybe the sheriff was right; why risk a knife or a bullet in the back chasing crooks and killers? You got mighty slim wages, even with the lucky breaks that land you a reward now and then. Safer to go into some steady business.

Hammet shrugged.

"Fat risks, slim pickin's an' all," he muttered, "still there's somethin' about it yuh like!"

He hit his bunk hard with the prospect of a full day ahead, but he couldn't sleep well. He seldom dreamed, but tonight he seemed to be playing stud poker incessantly. He was playing with a large motley assortment—Helen Pierce, Sheriff Bailey, Clem Milsen, Sam Reed, Chick Timmons, Baldy Hendricks, George Graham and a dark-skinned fellow with a black mustache and a mean mouth. Somehow Hammet was always dealing—heart flushes to Helen and Sam Reed. But time after time, he was dealing aces and eights to Chick Timmons and Clem Milsen, who groaned lugubriously: *"Aces an' eights! I knowed it! It's the dead man's hand!"*

He awoke the next morning with a queer feeling of depression. He headed moodily in the direction of Clem Milsen's place to rout him out for the day's trip to Cullum Gap. As he mounted the rise that brought him in sight of Milsen's he was astounded to see a group of a dozen or so men and horses standing about where Clem's house had stood. For the house was no longer there!

Hardly believing his eyes, he clamped his spurs into his horse and flew over the ground between him and the strange phenomenon. Milsen's cabin, the one-room pine shack where he ate and slept, was a mass of blackened ruins. The smell of burned blankets and hair still hung in the air.

HAMMET'S glance ran round the group of men. Sheriff Bailey stood there, staring dumbly at him.

"Where's Milsen?" inquired Hammet.

"He's there," answered the sheriff with

a grim jerk of his thumb.

Hammet gazed dully at the horrible, shrunken, seemingly mummified body, huddled on the twisted remains of an iron cot.

"Why couldn't he run out?" he blurted. "I can't see a man sleepin' so sound that he'd burn to death in his bed! He would have tried to get out anyhow!"

"He'd been drinkin', remember," the sheriff reminded him.

"He wasn't that drunk!" denied Hammet.

The sheriff nodded. "I figgered the same thing m'self when I got here," he confided. "I looked over the body careful an' what's left o' the door an' winders. I couldn't find a trace to prove he'd been knifed or shot, but I'm as certain of it as if I was here!"

"What makes you so sure? The talk last night?"

"Go over an' look on the hitchin' post by the door, or where the door used to be."

Hammet went. Stuck in the crotch of a long splinter on the unscorched side of the post, he saw five playing cards; two aces; two eights, and a five-spot!

Hammet's mind was in a whirl. The possibility that these were the same cards Milsen had had the night before and that he had stuck them there himself was out of the question; for Hammet remembered that one of the aces, the one in which the warning had been written, had been the ace of diamonds. These happened to be the two black aces.

This was no accident or coincidence. This was the dramatic gesture, the signature, the "trade mark" of somebody—somebody who had murdered Clem Milsen and burned all the clues with him. All the *other* clues, Hammet corrected himself. Those five cards might tell a lot!

He turned to the sheriff. His face was grim.

"This is a dam' shame!" he muttered. "An' it's a black eye for us if there ever was one! Was anybody seen around last night?"

"Ain't heard o' nobody yet," replied Bailey. "The fire was first seen by a feller named Gifford; he rides for the Circle H outfit. That was about three o'clock an' it was burnin' fast then. By the time he got here, it was practic'ly burnt out."

"We'll have to keep inquirin'. Has anybody touched those cards?"

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

"They're about the only clue we'll get. I'm goin' to look over everything, o' course, but not much hope after a fire like this. But I might locate the deck these cards are outa, an' there might even be fingerprints on 'em."

The unpleasant job of examining the remains of Clem Milsen Hammet got out of the way first. He concluded that it was impossible to tell whether the body had been injured before the fire, unless a careful anatomical examination were possible.

He searched the charred embers of the shack for anything unusual or significant, and found nothing. He surveyed the ground for some distance around the house for footprints, hoofprints, cigar or cigarette butts, or anything else that might afford a lead; but so many had gathered on the spot that he learned nothing except that there was nothing much for him to learn.

ALL the time he saw the helpless face of Clem Milsen staring at an ominous hand of aces and eights! He was looking at this case in a different light now. Last night it had been a mere matter of robbery; a felony, of course, but a well planned, nervy enterprise against armed gamblers. There had been murder, too, last night; but that too had seemed almost a part of the game.

But was this part of the game? This was unfair and unnecessary—this fiendish reprisal! The motive was obvious: the only known witness to the identity of the killer of Chick Timmons had been silenced. But it seemed to Hammet that a real man, whether bandit or murderer, would have taken his chances, now that he had got away with the money. The thing was pure cowardice from any point of view, in Hammet's opinion, unless perhaps it was meant as an example to other possible witnesses.

The idea gave Hammet food for

thought. Might there, then, be other witnesses, witnesses worth scaring? Hammet swore under his breath. He would comb Lavera County from one end to the other to find them!

Finding barren ground elsewhere, he returned to the cards on the post and examined them carefully with a strong pocket lens.

"I hope you're right," he muttered to the sheriff, "about nobody touchin' these. I can't dust 'em yet, but there's what looks like two good thumbs, an' there must be fingermarks on the backs."

Hammet cut a piece out of the post with his knife so that he could carry the cards just as they had been left, without having to touch them with his own fingers.

"Could I have all these men here come into town an' give me their fingerprints?" he asked the sheriff as he swung up into the saddle. "Then, after I draw a good copy of the ones I find on the cards, we'll start out."

"Right!" nodded the sheriff. "An' I'm gonna telegraph the city an' see if we can

get some dope as to where Killer Kid is operatin'."

"Good idea!" agreed Hammet.

Hammet spent a busy hour and a half before he and the sheriff set out for Cullum Gap. The news of Milsen's death and the fact that the tenderfoot deputy was going after the outlaw with fingerprints had spread and aroused such curiosity that it was easy to get volunteers to go along.

Cullum Gap was in the hills in the extreme northern point of the county and existed only because some capitalist had bought out a pocket of pay dirt and was optimistic enough to think it ran all the way through the earth. About a hundred human beings lived in a few scattered shacks.

The posse argued with the suspicious and reluctant citizenry until they found Leon Tait, but not Horace. The family resemblance was there, if Milsen's description were correct; but Leon was not a big man.

Leon shrugged at all questions. He knew nothing about "Horse." He was around som'ers. Who wanted to know?

He submitted to fingerprinting only at the sheriff's threat of arrest backed up by a ready gun. Hammet observed privately that the prints bore no resemblance to those on the cards.

An all-day search of Cullum Gap and vicinity yielded no trace of Horse Tait in the flesh. The volunteers rode back to Piquo disappointed and discouraged. The two officers were the most cheerful in the crowd.

"Didn't reckon we'd find him sittin' on the main street waitin' for us the first day after!" remarked the sheriff.

As they rode into the county seat, the sheriff was handed a telegram.

"Huh!" he grunted. "That's what I thought!"

He handed the paper to Hammet. The message read:

Elmer Watson, alias Killer Kid apprehended yesterday Shreveport, Louisiana.

"That let's him out," nodded Hammet. "Somebody else is stealin' his stuff. Maybe tryin' to shift the blame on him. Tomorrow mornin'," he went on, "I want to round up everybody that was in Baldy's last night and ink their fingers too. The trouble with fingerprints is you got to cover the whole world unless you know who to suspect. I'll hit the trail for home now," he added. "Hope I sleep better'n I did last night!"

It was dark when he reached the little shack at Smile Canyon. Only a faint glow along the western horizon silhouetted the two young poplars. Over them a spray of stars arched gracefully in the deep blue. If only Helen could see it now!

"Eat a good meal!" Hammet said aloud to his pony as he unsaddled. "I'm goin'

in an' fry me a couple dozen eggs!"

He walked in and stopped suddenly. The room was pitch dark and there was not a sound but that of his own breath; but there was a distinct smell of candle grease that made him pause curiously. He hadn't used any candles since he'd bought that new lantern.

He shrugged. "Ought to air this place out more!"

He ate a hearty supper. Kicking off his boots for comfort and lighting a pipe for companionship, he dug down into a box for a little book he had on the identification of fingerprints. For a while he pored over it in the light of the lantern.

Finally with a yawn he tossed it into the drawer of the table. As he did so, his eye fell upon a deck of cards and he challenged himself to a game of solitaire before rolling in.

The cards fell smoothly for a while, but soon he began to run into snags.

"Where the devil," he growled, "is that ace of clubs!"

HE RAKED up the cards in defeat and ran through the deck to get a look at the elusive club ace. To his surprise it was not there!

"That's funny!" he mumbled, opening the drawer and peering into it for the missing card. "How come? Wonder if there's any more missing!"

He counted the deck and was further puzzled to find there were only forty-seven cards present. Quickly he sorted them by suites to identify the absentees. The ace of diamonds, he observed at once, was one of them. A vague, chilly feeling began to play over him. The tray of hearts was missing; one spade, the eight-spot; and one other club, also the eight-spot.

It was hard to believe he was not dreaming. Aces and eights! Not here, but missing! He had come to respect the reputation of that supposedly sinister hand, leaving legend and superstition aside and getting down to hard facts, hadn't Hammet run into them twice in the same connection? How was he to account for the fact that in a deck of his own, tonight, a hand of aces and eights, filled out with an odd card, was missing?

Obviously somebody must have come in and taken the cards. Maybe that explained the smell of candle grease. He glanced sharply around the room to see if there were any other traces of the intruder. Apparently none.

He tried to remember when he had last used the cards, but succeeded only vaguely. Not for three or four days at least. Was it possible that the murderer of Clem Milsen had stolen these cards to mark the murder? No, those cards had included two black aces, and anyway these cards had blue backs and the other ones were red backed.

Why should any one take them? Certainly their absence could not be meant as a warning or a threat; that was too subtle. He seldom opened that drawer. It was by the merest accident that he had tonight, and by a second accident that he had seen the cards and decided to play a game of solitaire, though he often did.

The logical conclusion became almost inevitable after everything had been considered. Those aces and eights were around somewhere, to threaten him with the fate of Milsen or something similar, without a doubt! He swept the walls with a glance. He examined the threshold and door carefully. He walked around the house to see whether they had been pinned in some conspicuous place he had missed in the dark. He went inside again and ransacked his bunk and shelves, every place he might be expected to run across them, and many places not so likely. He couldn't find them.

Instead of convincing him that his hunch was wrong, his failure to find the cards illogically strengthened the conviction that they were meant for him.

He was going to be threatened, was he! That was encouragement of a kind; it meant they were afraid of him! They undoubtedly knew he had found some fingerprints. Apparently they were fingerprints that would hang somebody.

HE SMILED grimly as he examined his revolver and rifle. He sat and smoked for some time, thinking. Suppose, he reflected, suppose there wasn't going to be any warning! That would

have been Killer Kid's way. Suppose some late rider would come over to see what all the smoke was and find those blue backed cards stuck in *his* hitching post!

He decided he was doing too much thinking. He barred the door carefully, blew out the lantern, and went to bed, but only after he had moved his bunk to a different corner of the room.

He was not destined to dream about aces and eights tonight. He could not get to sleep at all. The moon, which was now up, threw the rippling shadow of poplar leaves through the window. He watched their silent movement, as the events of the past twenty-four hours revolved in his mind, always winding up with the puzzle of those five missing cards.

Hammet pulled on his pants and pistol belt and slipped quietly out the door into the shadow of the poplars. He was surprised how much better he felt out in the caressing breeze.

He walked around the house, the shed, and the broken corral he had not taken time as yet to mend, having nothing to corral. Everything was quiet.

He sat down in the black shadow of one of the tree trunks and breathed deep breaths of peaceful air. He became accustomed to the swish of the brush and the faint sibilation of its insect inhabitants. He thought he heard the hoofbeats of horses, but when he put his ear to the ground curiously, he could make out nothing.

Suddenly in the shadow of a clump of locust he saw a man. He had not seen the man come, so silent had been his arrival. Evidently the man did not see him; for, as Hammet watched, he moved past some ten yards away. His motions were quick and easy, silent as a cat's. He clung to the shadows until he reached the door of the house. Here he paused, listening, his back to Hammet.

The ex-detective's muscles tightened. His whole body became tense. After the first flush of surprise, he found his mind clear and cold, his body calm and deliberate. His feeling was that a wild animal had walked into his trap, an animal he would have to kill to capture.

Silently Hammet crept forward.

"Were you lookin' for me?" he said suddenly.

The man swung around and at sight of Hammet's gun at his middle, moved his hands intuitively upward.

"By God, Hammet!" he whispered hoarsely. "Jest who I *was* lookin' for!"

Hammet recognized for the first time the face that peered from the heavy shadow of the hat. Sam Reed! Hammet frowned in perplexity at his rival for the hand of Helen Pierce, but his gun did not waver nor did his gaze so much as flicker.

"He's after you, Hammet!" warned the midnight visitor, darting swift looks into the brush. "I come to tell you."

"Who's after me?" asked Hammet.

"The feller that held up the gang last night an' shot Chick Timmons. I overheard him talkin' with a pal o' his. He's gonna get you like he got Milsen!"

"When?"

"Tonight!" panted Reed, agonized at the deputy's apparent indifference to the news. "I followed him here an' slipped around ahead to tell you. Look!"

Hammet did not turn his head.

"Before I look," he said dryly, "let me have your gun."

He reached forward and unbuckled the young rancher's belt; then looked in the direction he had indicated. Sure enough, down between two swells in the ground Hammet saw a man—on horseback, alert, as if watching and listening.

"If you had a rifle," whispered Reed, "you could hit him from here."

"I can hit him from here with this," remarked Hammet calmly. "But why kill him if I can take him alive?"

"Take him alive!" laughed Reed mirthlessly. "How can you hope to take a desperate bird like that? O' course, if you want me to help, I'm willin', providin' you let me have a gun——"

"Thanks," cut in Hammet. "Never mind. I'll do it alone—somehow. But say,

Sam," he went on, looking the other hard in the eye, "I'm still kinda uneasy about you; I'm half scared to turn my back on you!"

"Why—why the hell should you be?" demanded Reed, wincing resentfully.

"I dunno," replied Hammet. "It's jest a hunch maybe. Maybe it's that dirty trick you played on me last night. Now, I want that bird down there, but for safety-first reasons, I'm gonna tie you up before I leave you!"

"Tie me up!" gasped Reed. "Is that the way you thank me——"

"I'll thank you double," returned Hammet evenly, reaching for a rope that hung by the door, "if you got it comin'!"

He flung the loop with one hand over Reed's head and pulled it tight across his chest, pinioning his arms.

"Hey!" protested Reed. "Not so tight!"

"Tight!" echoed Hammet, sincerely surprised. "Call that tight. Remember, Sam, I'm *tyin'* you, not playin' ring-around-a-rosy!"

He passed the rope two more times around and yanked it regardless of protests. As he did, he heard something snap. At the same time a terrified cry escaped the lips of the captive.

"Help!" he screamed, clawing helplessly at the rope with his hands. "God! Let me go! Help, for God's sake!"

His pistol poised uncertainly, Hammet was too amazed to fire or even to speak. Reed's chest began to sputter with tiny flames, as if his heart were literally afire. Clouds of white smoke issued forth, wreathing the tied man's head and choking his agonized cries. He stumbled and fell writhing.

Hammet tried to loosen the rope, but the fumes drove him back. He dashed into the house for the bucket of drinking water he kept on the ledge and hurled it at the flaming man, now almost completely hidden by the thick white clouds.

AS HAMMET emerged from the house, a horse plunged up through the brush. Both horse and rider shied at the startling conflagration.

Hammet and the newcomer saw each other at the same time. Both were taken off their guard. Their pistols cracked at almost the same instant. Hammet ducked and fired again, this time not so wildly. The rider's gun clattered in the gravel. His horse sidestepped in terror at the first strong whiff of the white fumes. Its suddenly inert rider tottered and slid heavily to the ground.

Hammet rushed to the fallen man. The coarse, black mustache, the dark skin, and the almost Indian features identified him beyond doubt.

"Horse Tait after all," muttered Hammet.

The outlaw opened his gimlet black eyes narrowly.

"Awright, bo!" he hiccoughed, clutching his right breast painfuly. "It's me! I'm done fer. Shoot another an' end it quick!"

"Wait!" cried Hammet. "Tell me, did Reed help you in all this business?"

"Don't get it wrong, Mister," denied the dying man. "He didn't help me. I helped him. The stick-up was his notion, an' we split on it. When he found this feller Milsen had spotted me, he was scart stiff I was gonna get caught an' holler, so he had to get him outa the way. Then when he heard you found his fingermarks on that job, he couldn't hardly wait till he got you the same way."

"They were his fingerprints, then?" repeated Hammet.

"Sure. The bon-fire racket was all his notion; an' his doin', too. I stood watch fer him, same's I did here. Reckon he had a misfire with his little bottle o' chemicals this time."

"Bottle, uh? I musta broke it when I tied him!"

"God, that smoke is awful!" groaned the outlaw.

Hammet fanned some of the fumes away and bent over the prostrate body of Sam Reed, seared and scarred with deep burns. He cut the still tenacious rope and removed the charred, tattered shirt. Bits of thin glass fell from it; and from the other pocket dropped five playing cards.

"My aces and eights!" breathed Hammet, awe-struck. "Thank God he never got the chance to deal 'em to me!"

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

"WHICH WAY IS THE WAGON?"

HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS, like Ernest Haycox, thinks an author ought to confine his writing to his fiction characters, and leave himself pretty thoroughly out of the picture. We asked him for an autobiography to be used as one of The Circle series, and he replied with chatty gossip about the old-time Westerners he knows. And we think his letter is a pretty good index of the sincerity and genuineness of the author of "Lone Butte," in this issue:

"Well, I had rather sit in with your outfit than a Bank Tellers' Circle, because when a bank teller begins to monkey with fiction, he's usually serious, and his books are never popular, especially with the Federal authorities.

"Speaking of old-timers. Andy Adams just autographed one of his books for me. All he said was: 'Hail, Henry! Which way is the wagon?' I sure like that autograph! You see, there hasn't been any wagon for so long. I happened to be over along the Panamints a while ago, and saw some desert cattle. The brands were just beginning to peel, and the brands were plenty big. The friend who was along with me said he had noticed those letters pasted on the cows and that some of the letters were beginning to curl up and come off.

"Buck Connor dropped in the other day. He is homesteading near Quartzite, Arizona. Says when he gets lined out he is going to do a story or two. Buck owns the sawed-off thirty-forty Winchester that Dick Yardlaw used to such good advantage. Buck got the rifle when he was with the Texas Rangers. And that wasn't all he got at the time.

"Gene Rhodes is living over in Alamogordo, New Mexico, which used to be his old stamping ground in the days of Pat Garrett, when the trail from Las Cruces to Alamogordo was a wagon-track. Gene could tell a whole lot more about the old West than he has told, but he is very modest about his own share in the doings of that period. I heard a lot about Gene when I was camped with the Rucker boys up in the Gallinas hills. But I'm not going to spill any beans in the ashes.

"You see, I used some real names once. It happened that Smoky, a young friend just up from Arizona, was telling me about some folks down there with real, old-time names. Smoky wrote out a string of them for me and I used them in a story because they sounded good. First thing I knew I was threatened with a law-suit, because the names fitted my characters too well. I didn't know the first thing about any one of these fellows, but it seems I made too good a guess.

"Alec McLaren is another old-timer who jingles the telephone every so often and tells me he has just got back from Canada, and intends to go up that way again as soon as he can. While he was on a trip over in Europe, a year or so ago, he kept sending me labels taken from Scotch whisky bottles. They were beautiful labels, and made a fine collection. I didn't know that Alec was so interested in the Old Masters till those labels began to arrive.

"Well, the fire is getting kind of low, and the second guard is just going out, so

I think I'll hunt my bed and crawl in. In the morning I'm going to rope me a gentle horse and ride around and watch the boys work. You see, I'm not a real hand, just a friend that the outfit treats pretty well. And I always make it a point to stand in well with the cook. He's the old boy that keeps a fellow from growing together in the middle.

"HENRY KNIBBS."

THIS TAKES THE PRIZE

SEE what SHORT STORIES has done in the Rystad family! Not, to be perfectly truthful, that we can honestly object; for the magazine seems to be having just the effect on Mrs. Rystad's husband we want it to have. Mrs. Rystad, whose home is in Texas, wins this issue's $25 prize with her letter. She writes:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

Whatever you do, for pity's sake do not suggest that someone write in and tell how to make SHORT STORIES *more* interesting! As it *is*, every time my husband buys a SHORT STORIES he just buries himself like a turtle and reads and reads, no matter how much the fire whistle may blow or how often I call him to supper. All I can get out of him is "uh-uh" till he gets through reading.

Sometimes I think I will hide the magazine from him like mamma used to do my oldest brother's Tip Top Weeklies. She and Betty, my oldest sister, just politely stuck them through a hole in the ceiling and I don't think he ever found them. But I don't know where I could hide SHORT STORIES, as Conrad has always hidden his magazine in all the good hiding places we have. He conceals them from my brother Otto and another boy who is always wanting to read them; sometimes before Conrad gets through they'll come around: "Sconrad got SHORT STORIES yet?" I'll say, "I don't know—look around," and they'll lift up a corner of the mattress and look under it, on top of the safe, behind the dresser, and ever so many silly places.

One time Conrad misplaced SHORT STORIES and could not find it high nor low, so he began to suspect me of hiding it. He followed me around just like he did before we were married—only instead of being all smiles and attention and candy and flowers, he was stern and cold and threatening. I breathed a sigh of relief when he found it and I was cleared of all suspicion.

Once when we were away from home for a few hours, SHORT STORIES was stolen. We had money and other valuables in the house, but nothing was missing but SHORT STORIES. Now this is an actual fact and can be proven by the "thief," who brought it back when he had finished reading it.

I never read it myself, because I don't have time, and there's nothing about how to raise babies or any recipes in it! But one of these days I'm just going to *take* time to read a story or two to see what's so fascinating about it anyway!

MRS. CONRAD RYSTAD,
Clifton, Texas.

Another $25 prize next issue, and each issue after that, for the best letter received during each two-week period. It's an open field—all comers are eligible. The only by-law is that the letters must be associated with SHORT STORIES—comment on the magazine, "crabs" about it, anecdotes of personal experiences suggested by its stories—or what have you?

Oil up your fountain pen, right away, and write that letter you've had in mind! It may be worth $25 to you.

COMING EVENTS

YOU'RE going to meet a broncho-busting, adventure-hardened writer in the next issue of SHORT STORIES—George C. Henderson, whose biography shows that he has piloted everything from a Montana mustang to a pitching airplane. The Painted Stallion," a smashing complete novel, will be Mr. Henderson's first story in this magazine; but it will be followed by other yarns of the adventurous range he knows so well. "The Painted Stallion" is a tale of a newcomer to the West who had to fight peril and prejudice to make good.

The next issue will present also a new Ernest Haycox short, "The Man from Montana"—gunfights and a mystery man. There will be other Western stories—"A Man Entire" by William Corcoran among them. "Slave Trail Ranch" by Charles Tenney Jackson takes a Texas deputy sheriff into the Florida cypress swamps. There will be a railroad yarn, a tale of an adventurous bus route, and other stories of action and daring men.

And of course there'll be the surprising conclusion of "Colorado," William MacLeod Raine's gripping pioneer serial. The continued story which you readers yourselves helped to name, "Buying Trouble," by Jackson Gregory, will follow "Colorado."

TWO NEWCOMERS

TWO writers make their bows in SHORT STORIES pages in this issue. One is Jacland Marmur, the other Dex

Volney. Mr. Marmur's "Ecola!" he says, was inspired by sailor's stories about the ill-fated schooner *Ecola,* a vessel which, though only seven years old, its owners are junking in Shanghai because misfortune so persistently pursued it. Mr. Marmur, born twenty-six years ago in Alsace-Lorraine, grew up in Brooklyn, was destined for a business career and at length gave himself up to his yearnings for adventure. He wandered from Brooklyn to the West Coast, worked in Sierra lumber camps, and finally went to sea. His voyages have pretty well compassed the American waters; so he knows whereof he writes.

Likewise Mr. Volney, who tells briefly of his own experiences as follows:

"I've been going to sea on ocean tramps for thirteen years; have passed through the Panama Canal 31 times, so far. But I have made a good many stays ashore, too, in out-of-the-way places. Was in Alaska four voyages, and remained up there, in the Shumagin Islands and in the Bering Sea country, for a couple of years. My knowledge of the inhabitants comes largely through the fact that I acted as an unlicensed attorney in the commissioner's court, where the inception, growth and culmination of any number of remarkable Northern romances were unfolded with fascinating vividness. Imagine a courtroom in which the judge sits on a bookkeeper's stool behind an old battered counter and smokes his pipe in the course of a trial, and with a long-barreled six-gun within reach of his hand!

"Unlike many of my stories, 'Snow-Melt' is not strictly a true yarn. The characters are genuine, including the dog; I have simply placed them in a relationship to one another that they did not happen to have in real life."

"The Crate for Cape Girardeau" is Paul Deresco Augsburg's second SHORT STORIES yarn. Mr. Augsburg's fascination for the Mississippi, he says, began with reading Mark Twain, and increased when he saw it at flood time at New Orleans five years ago. He went to St. Louis, hoping to find a packet to take him "a long ride on the river"; and Mississippi traffic had fallen off so badly, largely because of the inroads of the motor truck, that a fifteen-hour journey to Cape Girardeau was the best he could do. But the story you've doubtless read and liked in this issue grew out of it.

THE MAIL BAG

A WESTERNER, Mr. Vic Kennedy, comes to bat to say he's had too steady a diet of Western stories. He's frank enough so that we know it isn't soft soap when he declares SHORT STORIES "has this fault less than any other magazine I know of." Still, a fault's a fault; and we'd admire to know, as any first-rate cowboy would put it, what the rest of you think about it. Here's Mr. Kennedy's interesting letter:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

I have read your Story Tellers' Circle with interest for many years, but have found it hard to convince myself that I had anything of interest to contribute, so radical are my ideas—radical in the sense that they seem to clash with the magazine publisher's idea of what the general public wants.

"Western" stories, unless they be exceptional ones, have come to be my pet aversion, since most magazines of a general character seem to try to specialize on them, at least to the extent of giving them too large a share of space. Western stories are all right in their place, but except in a magazine so labeled why should they take up any more space than mystery, Oriental, Northern, business, political, or any other type of story? Variety is just as essential to a well-balanced magazine as to a well-balanced diet. Let those who want Westerns read a Western story magazine. SHORT STORIES falls down, in my estimate, in this regard least of any magazine of its class.

Lest I be misunderstood: I do not use the derogatory term "Western" to classify every story whose scene is laid in the West. The story "Seventy-Six Dollars" in the September 25 issue is a case in point. This story has a pull to it that does not depend upon wild riding, gun-toting and killing. It does not rely on an atmosphere of sheer brutality to give it excuse for existence. I am not opposed to killing where it is used as part of the plot in proper proportion. I have lived in California and Arizona towns in which killings were not unusual. But killings do not occupy the minds of the inhabitants all the time, so why should such events fill an entire story?

Another type of "Western" I take exception to is that in which autos and radios are dragged into a scene that must have happened twenty years or more ago. If the *wild* Western story must be told in all its harrowing details, why not keep the plot in the period when such things happened, or if they are presented as happening in recent years, show that such events were exceptions rather than every day occurrences?

As you will see, my method of telling why I read SHORT STORIES is a negative one. I read the

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why?_____

NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

magazine because it has the faults I name less than any other I know of. My aim is not to criticise SHORT STORIES, but to suggest humbly my taste in reading. No magazine can suit all the people all the time and I shall go on reading where I find what I want.

Sincerely yours,
VIC KENNEDY,
Whittier, California.

HERE'S a letter some of you may want to answer. SHORT STORIES traveled a long way, but we are glad it found so good a friend when it got there.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:—

Pray excuse me for taking the liberty of writing these few lines to you. How can I ever thank you for producing such a magazine as SHORT STORIES. I purchase two monthly from our "Native Kitab Wallah." "Treasure Trail," "The Bookkeeping Buckaroo," "Devil's Playground," "The Outcasts of Kettle" and "Mustang Blood" are a few of the various stories that prove the worth of your magazine. It's a rare find, if any other magazine possesses better reading yarns than yours. Perhaps it's because I've a tendency for the great outdoors that makes your stories so prominent in my mind. Being a Londoner myself, where open spaces are very rare, I often long for a romance connected with the prairie. How I wish one could just drift into the life of your American plains. Do you think any of your readers connected with ranch and plain, could spare a line in response to my appeal for friends? How I should love a letter to break this dull monotony of life out here. I should be ever thankful for one and would always answer.

Hoping I'm not making too big a request on your kindness, and may your magazine ever meet with the success that it so richly deserves, I beg to remain,

Yours truly,
Pte. Newman, "C" Coy. 1st Bn. The D. C. L. I.,
Lucknow, U. P., India.

OLD-TIMER TIBBETTS

OLD-TIMER TIBBETTS' beard was drooping sadly when he visited us last week.

"I'm a-pullin' stakes fer parts unknown," he asserted firmly. "Got to go some'eres where things ain't so plumb civilized a feller can't even shoot hisself in a hon'rable manner—"

We interrupted hurriedly. Old-timer wasn't aiming to do anything rash!

"Uh-unh," he replied despondently. "Tain't me. But I'm a-readin' in the paper, here t'other day, 'bout a hombre which shoots hisself with a lawn-mower. Seems 's if a .38 ca'tridge is layin' there, an' the old hay-clipper jest picks it up, aims it at this feller's eyebrow an' lets fly. Doesn't damage him much, it not bein' a machine gun like these here Chicago parlor bandits are usin'.

"Yes, sir! Things is too danged civilized hereabouts. I'm hittin' the trail for Mexico, er some'eres they still shoot ca'tridges out o' six-guns!"